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The Humbling of Mark Lester

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THE HUMBLING OF MARK LESTER.

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THE HUMBLING OF MARK LESTER.

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT

(MRS. J. A. COMFORT).

Author of

"The Old House by the Water;" "The Bonded Three;

"From the Scourge of the Tongue;"

"Among the Torches of the Andes;" etc., etc., etc.

London:

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT & Co.

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IAGO:

"Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves!"

OTHELLO:

"O, misery!"

IAGO:

"Poor and content is rich, and rich enough;
But riches, fineless, is as poor as winter,
To him that ever fears he shall be poor."

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Taunton:

E. GOODMAN AND SON, PRINTERS, NORTH STREET.

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THE HUMBLING OF MARK LESTER.

CHAPTER I.

A Cycle Tragedy.

MRS. DESART shut the gate of the garden with a decided click, and walked down the avenue of limes, that led to the high road, at a brisk pace.

It was characteristic of her to walk quickly, she being one of those people who find strolling more difficult than hard work, and more tiring also.

The afternoon, too, was pleasant and inspiring, bright sunshine, invigorating wind, and the beauty and promise of late April, to render a walk the most attractive means of passing the hour before tea-time. Moreover, she had a bundle of letters to post, and the Post-office was a long mile from the Limes, where she had her home as the companion of Mrs. Wynter.

A well-connected, aristocratic old lady was Mrs. Wynter, who paid her companion exactly half what she gave her cook, but expected fully twice as much return for the money in the way of attention. The cook would have openly rebelled at the drudgery of the companion's existence, but Alice Desart was humbly thankful for the shelter of such a home, and accepted its limitations with a cheerful determination to make the best of them.

Yet she did not look a very cheerful, nor yet a very

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happy woman, on that April day, as she took her way to the Stillwater Post-office. Her grey eyes had a repressed, disappointed look, as if she had not found in life all she had expected of it; and there was a half-fearful, half-defiant expression on her face, mute witness to the fact that a skeleton of some sort was tucked away in her private and particular cupboard.

She had been a resident at the Limes for just seven months, having taken the situation when the last companion had married. It was a little way Mrs. Wynter's companions had, of finding husbands, and going off to homes of their own, just as she had got used to their presence in her house, and come to depend upon them.

Yet she was not a match-maker, but so much the reverse, that few of the matches had even been tolerated by her, much less sanctioned or approved. And the fact that mainly determined her in taking her present companion, was because of the small probability of a recurrence of this old vexation, for Alice Desart was a woman with a past; and a very deleterious past, too, in the eyes of most people to whom she applied for the means of earning her daily bread.

But Mrs. Wynter was satisfied, and quite content to ignore everything that had gone before; whilst Mrs. Desart was equally willing to live only in the present.

Her face grew brighter as she went along; the village was at its prettiest in spring-time, and each little plot of garden ground had something in the way of flowers to beautify and bring it fragrance.

There was nothing about Stillwater to mark it from hundreds of other remote country villages; indeed, on account of the flatness of the surrounding country, it was even less picturesque than many of its neighbours, though its magnificent elms and spreading beeches had a charm all their own. And the church, dating back to 1560, was adorned with fine oak carving, which had luckily escaped the destroying hands of ruthless reformers, and remained

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intact, to delight the eyes of a more beauty-loving generation.

The village street stretched in serpentine turns and twists for a mile or more across the plain; here it rose a little to cross a bridge, there it dipped almost to the level of the pond, which pond might be said to be the largest thing Stillwater contained—the church, of course, excepted.

So big was the pond that the road had to make a wide curve to get past it, and Mrs. Desart, coming from the Limes, saw that a considerable crowd had gathered on the other side of the water, where the road curved again sharply round to the Post-office.

The sight of this collection of people quickened her pace still more, for she was young enough yet to find distraction pleasant, and Stillwater was not such a wildly dissipating place to live in, as to render one indifferent to the small excitements of barrel-organs, Punch and Judy shows, or even —an accident. Apparently it was an accident that was responsible for this particular gathering of the curious, for Mrs. Desart could see a bicycle lying on the ground, whilst the people were bending over some one prostrate near it.

"There ought to be a notice put up that the road is dangerous there. I wonder there have been no accidents before," she said, as she hurried along, thinking of nothing worse than that some adventurous wheelman, in scorching round the corner from the Post-office, had accidentally cooled his ardour in the muddy waters of the pond.

The crowd had swelled to a size almost unprecedented in Stillwater, by the time she gained its outer edge. There were the butcher, and the baker, and the candlestick-maker, or his present-day equivalent in the man who kept the general shop, the cobbler, the blacksmith, and the entire female population, excepting old Mrs. Colman, who had been bedridden for the last fifteen years, and was thus by sheer physical disability prevented from being among the crowd.

That there were so few juveniles present was owing to

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the fact that school was not yet out. But there were a good many infants in the arms of their various mothers and nurses, several bigger children on the sick list, and the Anderson boys from Clorpe Corner, who had chosen this especial afternoon for playing truant.

All these details Mrs. Desart noted almost unconsciously as she edged herself into the throng, with a view to the ascertaining of the size and nature of the disaster.

But every one else was athirst for the same information, and so the process of edging in was a very slow one.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Dewe?" she demanded, presently, finding her way effectually blocked by a fat woman, who carried a baby on each arm.

Mrs. Dewe swung round in prompt answer to this query, nearly knocking Mrs. Desart down as she turned, for the crowd was at close quarters now. "It's a haccident, Miss" (in Stillwater all ladies, married as well as single, were called Miss). "Young Mr. Lester were a-comin' round the corner on his bicycle, when he ran into a tramp as was a-comin' the other way, and then Mr. Lester he fell into the pond."

"Were they hurt, Mr. Lester or the tramp?" demanded Mrs. Desart, breathlessly; and then the crowd opening suddenly, showed her a clear avenue to where a man lay prostrate on the ground, whilst there knelt beside it a boyish figure dripping with the liquid mud of Stillwater pond, and beyond him, kneeling also, the stout landlord of the *Hollow Oak*.

"They says that the poor fellow is dead," continued Mrs. Dewe, with a strong emphasis on the "says," which implied that she did not share in the popular opinion.

"Dead? Nonsense; have they sent for a doctor?" asked Mrs. Desart in a sharp tone, as the crowd swayed together again, shutting out from her sight the figure on the ground, and those who knelt beside it.

"Yes, Miss," said Mrs. Clupp, whose husband worked in Jim Farthing's forge; "my man went off to Norton, six or

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seven minutes ago; he rode Mr. Farthing's pony, and he'll do the distance under the half-hour, if he keeps on as he started, I should say."

"And it will take Dr. Trevor half an hour to get here, even supposing that he is in when the messenger gets there. A whole hour before anything can be done. Let me pass, Mrs. Clupp. I have seen several accidents in my time, and perhaps I can help the poor man."

"No, no, Miss, he's got a hurt on his face, and is knocked about considerable, and it ain't a sight for the likes o' you;" and Mrs. Clupp, who was ample of form, like her neighbour, Mrs. Dewe, interposed her broad back to screen the lady from the ghastly sight.

Alice Desart laughed, and there was bitterness mingled with her merriment.

"I am not afraid; why should I be?" she said; and then, elbowing fat Mrs. Clupp gently, but firmly, to one side, edged her way through the congested inner circle, until she stood close beside young Lester in his dripping garments.

"Raymond, I believe you are drenched, and every moment you remain so means at the very least a week longer of suffering by-and-bye," she said, in a reproachful tone.

The young man in the wet clothes looked up at the sound of her voice. "Oh, Mrs. Desart, won't you see if something can't be done? They say the poor fellow is dead!"

There was a whole world of dismayed self-reproach in his tone, as he besought her aid.

Mrs. Desart promptly dropped on her knees beside the prostrate form, gently turning the tramp's head so that she might look into his face.

Then suddenly she sprang up, pushing away the head of the unconscious man as if it had the power to hurt her, and with a cry, such as a hunted animal might give when, brought to bay, it sees no more possibility of escape,

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she pushed the crowded people to the right and to the left, and fled backwards along the road by which she had come.

Raymond Lester had started up, too, and stood gazing after her in astonishment, yet moving not a finger to intercept her flying feet; whilst the fat landlord of the *Hollow Oak* put his ear down close to the mouth of the inanimate figure upon the ground, under the delusion, maybe, that it had spoken, and so frightened the lady away.

The letters Mrs. Desart had been carrying to post dropped from her fingers as she ran, and lay unheeded upon the road, until some passer-by gathered them up and put them into the letter-box.

The few people who saw her go tearing through the village thought she was running to fetch something from the Limes for the recovery of the injured man, and none of them ever dreamed of the terror that was giving wings to her feet.

Up the avenue she sped, fumbling at the fastening of the garden gate, unable to open it at first because of her blind, unreasoning horror of pursuit, flinging it wide when she did succeed, and hurrying through it and up the path to the hall door, which stood open.

"Mrs. Wynter, Mrs. Wynter, hide me, hide me! Leon has come here, and I must go away to escape him. Can't John put the horse in the trap, and take me to the station, right away?"

Mrs. Wynter twisted round in her chair, and stared at the agitated, trembling woman upon the threshold.

"Really, Alice, you have no more sense, where that husband of yours is concerned, than a child of five years old might have if threatened with a bogey-man at bedtime," she said, severely.

"But he is here——" began Mrs. Desart; then stopped in confusion, perceiving for the first time that Mrs. Wynter was not alone, but had a gentleman with her, who sat

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farther from the door, half hidden by the big screen with which Mrs. Wynter loved to fortify herself from draughts.

The visitor rose at once, perceiving Mrs. Desart's evident embarrassment, and held out his hand to the lady of the house. "I will look in about that business of which I was speaking to you at another time, Mrs. Wynter; it will not spoil by keeping."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Lester, but you are not going yet. I want first of all to know what all this fuss is about, and then it is just possible that I may need your help," rejoined the old lady, in no very pleased tone. There was nothing in the world that she loathed so much as a scene—more especially a scene that had a hysterical woman in it, and she deemed it advisable to retain a helper close at hand, in case of emergency.

"I will stay if I can be of any assistance, certainly," he replied, readily; then stepping towards shrinking, shivering Alice Desart, he laid a kindly, protecting hand upon her arm, and drew her towards a chair. "Sit down, Mrs. Desart, and don't be frightened. No one shall harm you here; we will take care of that," he said, soothingly.

The words, the tone, the assurance of protection as conveyed by the touch of that firm, kindly hand upon her arm, all did their part in calming the frightened Alice Desart, who, after another moment or two spent in battling with the dry, choking sobs that struggled in her throat, essayed an explanation of her excitement and fear.

"I was going to post the letters; there was a crowd gathered on the edge of the pond. I went to see what was the matter. I found that Raymond Lester had ridden over a tramp; and the tramp was Leon," she said, her words tumbling out, in the agitation of her mind, with incoherent breaks here and there.

"Raymond rode over him; was he hurt, then?" demanded Mr. Lester, with a frown. That young son of his was for ever getting into some pickle or other, and he foresaw

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uncomfortable demands for compensation, in the near future, if this tramp should be in any way permanently damaged.

"Leon was—he lay on the ground, and did not speak," faltered Mrs. Desart, her bosom heaving, her eyes dilating, and all her former terror re-asserting itself.

Then Mrs. Wynter broke out with increased impatience: "If he is hurt, if he can't speak even, how can he come here to interfere with you, I should like to know? I have no patience with you, Alice, at your age; you ought to be possessed of more self-control," and she glared fiercely at the shivering woman in the opposite chair.

But again Mark Lester intervened. He was of a kindly nature, that hated to see a woman suffer; and the sight of Mrs. Desart's terror-stricken panic filled him with quite a fierce zeal to do something on her behalf. "I will go down to the pond, and see for myself what is the extent of the mischief, and then I will come back at once to let you know."

"Yes," said Mrs. Wynter grimly, "that is the most common-sense thing to be done. And meanwhile, Alice, it is nothing short of idiotic of you to sit there crying and shivering; time enough for that, when your beautiful husband appears here to claim you, or to force you to protect yourself legally; although even then, a little firmness would have a much better effect on him than all your whining and fretting."

They were not kind words; and the tone and manner of their utterance was more unpleasant still, but they served to stop Mrs. Desart's tears, which was just what they were intended to do.

She even faltered out a word of thanks to Mr. Lester for his kindness, and then in the next breath besought him not to betray her whereabouts to Leon, if he should be sufficiently recovered to ask for her.

"No, no, of course I will not. Have you no more confi-

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dence in my judgment than to fear such a thing, Mrs. Desart?" he asked, as anxious to rally her failing courage as Mrs. Wynter, only more humane in his manner of going to work to do it.

"Yes, I can trust you; only I am so afraid," she replied, illogically enough; but then, it is the way of women to be illogical, and she was only following the instinct of her kind.

"Afraid!" interjected Mrs. Wynter, with a snort of disgust. "Wait until you have something to be afraid of. For aught you or I can tell to the contrary, he may die of his hurt. In which case the world will be well rid of a superfluous man."

"It won't be a pleasant thing for Raymond, if he does," Mr. Lester said with a troubled frown, as he went away; yet somehow the frown had smoothed itself out before the end of the avenue was reached; and, as he strode briskly forward along the village street, he began to see things in quite a different light, even telling himself that although Mrs. Wynter had a singularly candid, almost brutal way of stating a fact, she was a woman of sound judgment, nevertheless; and certainly, Mrs. Desart would be well rid of her most undesirable husband.

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CHAPTER II.

The Identification of Leon Desart.

BY a wonderful chance, Dr. Trevor was coming towards Stillwater, when he was met by Tom Clupp on the blacksmith's pony, and learning from that agitated and perspiring messenger, the cause why he was being summoned in such haste, went forward with all speed, leaving Clupp and the pony to follow in more leisurely style, a state of procedure which was duly appreciated by man and beast.

Arrived at the pond, Dr. Trevor alighted from his gig, leaving his horse unattended, in the middle of the road; no fear of that animal running away, the poor creature being much too hard-worked to have any disposition to take unnecessary steps in any direction whatever.

The man of medicine turned the unconscious figure over, looked here, looked there, felt the pulse, thrust his hand in the open front of the tramp's shirt, then rising, took off his hat with a solemn gesture.

"There is nothing that can be done," he said, with decisive finality; "the man is dead."

"Just what I said," put in the landlord of the *Hollow Oak*, with the swagger of certified knowledge, and with a certain amount of business satisfaction likewise, foreseeing the crowd of thirsty witnesses and spectators that the inquest would draw together.

Young Raymond Lester scrambled on to his feet, and stood looking down at the tramp with a bewildered expression on his face, as if he could not yet fully realize what had happened.

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It was at this moment that his father came striding up behind, and laid a firm hand upon his shoulder. "Raymond, lad, what is the matter?"

"Father, the man is dead; I killed him," replied the poor boy, with an irrepressible sob of utter misery and contrition.

A curious gleam of positive relief shot from Mark Lester's eyes; but Raymond did not see it, his newly-come-by manliness having broken down before this direful catastrophe, and left him sobbing with hysterical violence.

"You will kill yourself if you hang about any longer in these wet clothes of yours," said Dr. Trevor sharply. "The best thing you can do, is to run home as fast as you can go, and tumble into bed; I'll look round your way myself, after I've seen this business through, but you go off at once; don't ride, but run, or if you're not up to that, walk as fast as you can;" and the doctor bustled off to arrange for the removal of the body to the *Hollow Oak*, there to await the inquest.

"Are you coming, father?" asked Raymond, whose teeth were chattering with the cold of his dripping garments.

"No; I must stay and see the policeman when he comes, and then go back to the Limes; but there are plenty of folks here who can see you home," rejoined Mark Lester, with a glance round the crowd to see whom he would choose for the purpose.

"Nonsense; I'm not a baby in arms, to need a nursemaid," Raymond retorted testily, desperately affronted at the bare suggestion of an escort being necessary.

"I didn't say you were, but you are not fit to go home alone, for all that," said his father; then shouted to young Palmer from Clorpe, who had just come up: "Here, Palmer, you are just the man I want; see Raymond to the Priors, will you, and help him get to bed, if he needs it?"

"With all the pleasure in life," retorted young Hubert Palmer. "Come on, Ray; we'll take a bee line to the

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Priors, even if we have to swim the moat to do it; you won't get much wetter, that's one good thing."

Mark Lester watched the two disappear down the alley by Bartle's shop, and strike into the fields beyond, which was the nearest way to the Priors. Then he turned back to interview the policeman, who had thus tardily arrived upon the scene.

That functionary, secretly irritated that he had not been on the ground sooner to see all there was to be seen, was disposed to be extra autocratic and didactic now, and even descended to a little bluster because young Raymond Lester had gone off home, instead of remaining to be taken into custody.

"You know where to find him when you want him, Blore; meanwhile, he is best in bed," Mark Lester said, with sufficient haughtiness to make the man understand that civility might pay best in the long run.

Presently the doctor came bustling out again from the shed where the body had been taken, and Mark Lester pounced upon him without loss of time. "There's no doubt about the man being dead, I suppose?" he asked, with an anxiety that was fully justified by the circumstances, so the bystanders thought, although they would have been extremely surprised could they have known which way the anxiety tended.

"Not a bit of it. He must have died when he fell; though as there is no wound sufficiently serious to have caused his death, I'm inclined to think his heart must have been queer, in which case, the shock and the fall together did the work."

"Ah! it is a bad business," and Mark Lester sighed gloomily; then he asked in an abrupt tone, "Do you know him at all?"

"No; I've never seen the man before, not to my knowledge, and I don't readily forget faces. He's a stranger to Blore, too, so I expect we shall have to advertise."

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"Mrs. Desart knows him," said Mark Lester, slowly.

"Mrs. Desart; do you mean Mrs. Wynter's companion at the Limes?" demanded the doctor, permitting himself to show surprise, though, as a rule, he prided himself on his freedom from any such weakness. "I thought she was a stranger in this neighbourhood?"

"So she is. But there is a sad story in her life, apparently, for she says the man is her husband."

Dr. Trevor gave a long low whistle of intense amazement. "That tramp, Mrs. Desart's husband; poor soul, how I pity her! Well, she's free now, that is one mercy. But I say, Lester, will she want it kept quiet? Because if so, you will have to be careful; there are sharp ears about;" and he nodded in the direction of Blore, who was stolidly taking notes of the innkeeper's version of the tragedy.

"No," said Mark Lester, his words coming more slowly still, yet every one spoken with a decision that showed them to have been already weighed and pondered over. "There is nothing to be gained by keeping the matter quiet; she was right to say nothing about the man whilst he was alive, but now that he has gone, it is as well that folks should know she is legally free from her awful bondage."

Dr. Trevor looked at him sharply, as if to see what hidden meaning lay behind, but Mr. Lester's face was calmly inscrutable, his manner without a shade of embarrassment; and the doctor called himself a hard name for his stupidity in the matter of his unspoken thought and suspicion. "Shall I tell Blore of the man's connection with Mrs. Desart?" he asked.

"Yes; it will be as well that he should know at once, and it will save him trouble, too," Mark Lester answered; and then drew a little aside, whilst the doctor made his communication.

Blore was as much surprised as the doctor had been, and at the first unbelieving too; a moment's reflection, however, serving to convince him of the reliability of the

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assertion, for no one surely would own to such a derelict as the dead tramp, if there were no grounds for the statement. "I'll go and see the lady, and get her to come down and identify the body," he said, snapping his note-book covers together with quite a vicious air.

"There is no need for you to go; I am going round to the Limes myself, and will arrange with Mrs. Desart to come down and identify the body to-morrow morning, if that will do," said Mark Lester, anxious to spare the newly-made widow the catechizing to which Police-Constable Blore would deem it his duty to subject her.

Blore hesitated, mindful of his own importance, and desirous of evading no duty that might serve to enhance his dignity. But he had to see the coroner, warn the jury, and generally arrange for the inquest, so that it would be a great relief to be spared the walk to the Limes.

"Very well, sir; if it won't be troubling you, I should take it kind of you to arrange with the lady to be down here, say, by eight o'clock to-morrow morning; she'll have to come again at the inquest for the formal identification; but it's as well to make sure on that point before the sitting of the jury," he said, as deferential now to the owner of the Priors, as he before had been insolently dogmatic.

Mark Lester nodded, and turned away, merely saying as he went, that he would bear the cost of the funeral, seeing that the man had come by his death through Raymond's misadventure.

This was no more than the policeman had expected he would do, the master of the Priors being free-handed in his generosity, and comfortably well-off likewise. It was an open secret in Stillwater that many a poor cottager had escaped the ignominy of a pauper funeral, through the kindness of Mark Lester, who had a way of metaphorically putting himself into other people's shoes, and finding out where they pinched the hardest.

When he parted from the policeman, Mark went striding

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back through the village at a great pace. A comparatively young man, for he was not forty yet, well set up, and not bad looking, his early widowerhood had made him much sought after among the anxious mothers of marriageable daughters, but he appeared in no hurry to give the Priors a second mistress, and the careful and calculating mammas were fain to look somewhere else in order to find suitable sons-in-law.

Old Mrs. Lot Godfrey came down her garden path to stop him with a question as he passed; she was mother to the landlord of the *Hollow Oak*, a simple, God-fearing woman, whose greatest trouble in life was that her son cared not at all for the example his dead father had set him, but went his own way, caring only for the things of this world. The old woman wanted to know if the stranger was really dead, even waxing tearful when this assurance had been imparted to her.

"A sad trouble for you, and for Mr. Raymond too, sir," she said, lifting her lilac print apron to wipe her eyes.

Mark Lester gave an involuntary start; of course, that was how he ought to regard it, in the light of a catastrophe pure and simple, for himself and for Raymond. But with hope singing such a blithe song in his heart, he could not be gloomy for all his trying, and being honest above the average, he could not look dismal either, though he did endeavour to maintain a decent gravity of countenance before the tearful scrutiny of Mrs. Lot Godfrey.

"Such troubles are not of our choosing, and we must bear them as best we can when they come," he said, lifting his hat to let the cool wind pass over his heated brow; then, changing his tone, asked, "How is Susan to-day?"

"Ripening fast for a better world, poor girl, a world that'll be kinder to her than this has been," and the old woman's tears burst forth afresh.

"She is worse, you think?" he said, with kindly pity vibrating in his voice.

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"Yes, sir; the doctor says 'tis a matter of weeks now, or, perhaps, only days," the poor mother replied, whilst her apron went swiftly to her eyes again.

"But she will be better off, and you'll be—if not happy—content in knowing that she can suffer no more," he said, gravely, adding, in a low, sympathetic tone, "Poor Susan, what a denied life her's has been."

"Denied, yes; she's not had much that's bright here, but it'll all be made up to her by-and-bye, bless the Lord," and Mrs. Lot Godfrey turned back up the garden path, tearful still, yet greatly comforted by the manifest sympathy of her well-to-do neighbour.

But there was a heavy shadow now on Mark Lester's face, and his head was drooped forward like that of a man in deep thought. He was calling himself to book for that secret rejoicing in which he had indulged, even loathing that side of his nature that could exult whilst the higher and nobler part mourned a sinner cut off untimely in his sins, and a soul unpurged of earthly dross hurried into the presence of its Maker.

Mrs. Wynter was sitting alone when he reached the Limes, and commenced at once to upbraid him with having been so long gone upon his errand of enquiry.

"Couldn't help it, I can assure you," he said, with a sharp glance of enquiry round the room, to see if haply Alice Desart was present there.

"Well, is that man much hurt, or had he got up and run away before you reached the place?" she demanded, with ill-concealed anxiety.

"The man is dead," retorted Mark Lester, gloomily, wondering in a dull, abstracted fashion why it should be counted a sin to himself that he should be glad this tramp had died, yet not a sin in Mrs. Wynter to rejoice in the same way.

"Dead? now come, that is good news!" exclaimed Mrs. Wynter, sinking back in her chair with an air of profound relief.

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"It will be necessary for Mrs. Desart to identify the body, both before, and at the inquest," rejoined the other, in a slightly dictatorial tone, feeling a secret pleasure in dimming the too-evident brightness of the old lady's satisfaction.

"It will be highly *un*necessary for her to do any such thing. Indeed, no one need know that he is her husband; it will be no more than fitting that he should lie in a nameless grave, and I suppose you can keep a secret, Mr. Mark Lester?" she asked, with such ironical emphasis that he winced under the sting of it.

"I shall not keep this one, Mrs. Wynter, nor do I think that Mrs. Desart would wish it to be kept. Indeed, I have already informed Dr. Trevor and Blore, so by this time you can reckon upon fully half of the people in the village being acquainted with the same fact," he said, but carefully avoiding her eyes.

"And you have the hardihood to come and tell me this to my face?" she demanded, greatly incensed.

"Why not?" he asked, by no means delighted at being taken to task in this fashion, yet unable to show resentment.

"Think of the scandal and the gossip that will attach itself to my house, and my—my companion," she said, drawing herself up in an offended manner.

"A nine days' wonder," Mark Lester answered, in the tone of one who mentions some inconsiderable trifle.

"Probably, but nine hours would be too much for me; I object to being made in any way notorious. I suppose I shall have to dismiss Mrs. Desart, even though I have to be without a companion for a time," she went on, wearing the air of a deeply injured person, with the intention of making Mark Lester ashamed of himself.

But he would not take the hint, answering instead, in the most aggressively cheerful tone imaginable: "Not a bit of it. Go away to the seaside for a couple of months; take Mrs. Desart with you, and I'll guarantee Stillwater shall have forgotten all about this affair, and will, by that time,

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be revelling in quite a fresh sensation, even if I have to start it myself."

"How could you start a sensation?" she asked, a little mollified at being shown such an easy way of escape from a difficulty.

"I could get married," he replied, with mock gravity, and a subtle, undefined thrill of joy pervading his being as he spoke.

"Doubtless; but then, so you might have done any time these five years past, instead of wearing out the patience of every marriageable woman within a radius of twenty miles or more."

"It has been very wrong of me, I dare say, but you must remember I never asked them to exercise the virtue on my behalf. And now don't you think it is time that Mrs. Desart should be informed of what has happened?" he asked, with a sudden change of tone.

"There is no hurry; I will tell her when you are gone," the lady rejoined, easily enough. Her own mind being at rest on the subject, it did not appear a matter of very great importance to her whether others were uneasy or not.

Mark Lester rose instantly. "Then I will go now, and she will know the sooner. By the way, will you go with her to-morrow morning when she has to identify the body, or shall I?"

"Are you mad, Mr. Mark Lester, even to dream of asking me if I am going to poke my nose inside a horrid, low public-house to look at a dirty, dead tramp, whom nobody cares to own?" she cried, with a petulant wave of her hands.

"It is not pleasant work, of course, but on the other hand it would hardly be humane to let Mrs. Desart face the ordeal alone. However, there need be no trouble for you in the matter. I shall have to be present myself, and I can easily drive down there, and take Mrs. Desart with me," he said, as he took his leave.

But he hardly recognized Alice Desart in the bowed,

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closely-veiled figure that was waiting for him next morning, when he drove up in a pouring rain to take her down to the *Hollow Oak*, where Leon Desart's body lay. Bright, cheerful, and withal a trifle self-assertive, she had always struck him as a woman upon whom trouble would fall lightly; yet here she was, crushed and cowering before the touch of disaster, that, so far from being reckoned a calamity, was in truth a release from hideous bondage, and the uplifting of a burden that had been almost too heavy to be borne.

He remembered this peculiarity of her nature years afterwards, when the memory could only bring an added sting of misery with it.

It did not tend to lessen his interest in her that she should be crushed and tearful of manner; rather it tended still further to awaken his chivalry, and fan to a fiercer glow the passion of love that was stirring to life in his breast.

He did not trouble her with words, hardly even greeted her, as he reined in the steady old cob at the garden gate, and jumping down from the high dog-cart, assisted her to clamber up. Her veil was too thick for him to see if her tears were still falling as they drove rapidly down through the village, and it was raining hard, too; but there was a choked sound in her voice that made him think she was crying when she did speak. And he was hotly resentful with the dead man lying yonder, that he, though dead, should yet have the power to grieve the wife he had so basely ill-treated, and cruelly wronged.

A little knot of loungers had gathered about the door of the inn, despite the early hour and the pouring rain. But they drew aside as Mr. Lester drove up, and stopped under the swaying, creaking sign that bore the pictured oak.

The landlord, Silas Godfrey, came out, closely followed by Blore, the policeman, who had been driven to temporary shelter in the tap-room from the violence of the rain. Mrs. Desart bowed her head slightly in response to their

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greeting, but she did not speak, though yesterday she would have chatted pleasantly enough with either, or both, of them.

"You'll walk this way, if you please, ma'am," the landlord said, with a series of ducking bows, intended to convey his respectful sympathy with the lady in her trouble.

She followed him without a word, neither hesitating nor trembling. When the shed was reached, and the policeman had drawn aside the sheet that covered the corpse, she flung her own veil back, and stood looking down at the dead.

"His left cheek; I must see his left cheek," she said, her voice having a tense, strained sound in its sharpened ring, that struck discordantly upon the ears of her listeners.

The dead man was lying with his left cheek hidden upon the pillow that some kindly, pitying soul had thrust under his head, and only the right side of his face was to be seen.

The landlord of the *Hollow Oak* looked at the policeman, and that important functionary stared up at the cobwebs festooning the roof of the shed, but neither man moved to lay bare that hidden portion of the dead tramp's visage.

"Constable, am I allowed to touch the body?" demanded Mark Lester, in stern tones, thinking the men were wilfully obtuse, through their own distaste for handling the corpse.

Police-Constable Blore withdrew his gaze from the cobwebs, and fixed it reproachfully on the countenance of his questioner. "There's no law that can prevent you as I knows of, sir; not under the circumstances, leastways. But it wouldn't be a pleasant sight for the lady."

"I must see the left cheek," she insisted, doggedly, yet growing white to the lips as she spoke, and reeling suddenly as if the solid earth had rocked beneath her feet.

The policeman objected no more, but taking the head in both hands, moved it slightly round, thus laying open to view the bruised and battered cheek of the poor wayfarer, which collision with the bicycle had cut and gashed almost out of any likeness to a human countenance.

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With a strong shudder of horror, Mrs. Desart bent lower over the corpse, scanning the mangled cheek, with a curious, dissatisfied air; then lifting her head with a jerk, and with a heavy sigh that sounded almost like a sigh of intense relief, she said in firm, unwavering tones, "I believe this to be the body of my husband, Leon Desart, from whom I have lived apart since six months after our marriage."

"Thank you, ma'am," said the policeman, dropping the ghastly head with an air of great satisfaction.

But Mrs. Desart had not heard his thanks; she had quietly fainted, collapsing in a heap at the feet of Mark Lester.

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CHAPTER III.

The Nine Days' Wonder.

THE inquest on Leon Desart was over, and a group of neighbours had gathered in the house of Mrs. Lot Godfrey to discuss the event; and at the same time to show their sympathy for the poor old woman in her own trouble, which at this particular time was weighing so heavily upon her.

Not that Mrs. Lot Godfrey was given to encouraging gossip within the four walls of her cottage, or that she very much hankered after the sympathy of her neighbours either. But with Susan lying at the point of death, and the whole village in a commotion of upheaval, consequent upon the tragedy of Leon Desart's death, some departure from the ordinary rules of living was not merely natural, but almost inevitable likewise.

Mrs. Clupp was seated on the chair that was just inside the door, fanning herself vigorously too; for although the day was not particularly tropical in temperature, Mrs. Clupp had been hurrying, and, as her bulk was considerable, the exertion was exhausting. It had been her ambition to be first with the news of the coroner's verdict; and in this she was not disappointed, having distanced Mrs. Joe Smith by the length of the garden, whilst Mrs. Dewe and her two babies toiled along in the rear.

"And it was not even brought in accidental death, through bein' ridden over by that bicycle," panted Mrs. Clupp, using her improvised fan with so much energy as to raise a small gale of wind in her vicinity.

"If it wasn't accidental, what was it, then; they didn't

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surely think that Mr. Raymond would do such a thing on purpose?" demanded Mrs. Lot Godfrey, with some indignation stirring in her tones. The Lesters of Stillwater Priors had been among the best friends she had known, during her husband's last long illness, and in her straitened widowhood; and she was loyal to the backbone.

"Not they," chimed in Mrs. Joe Smith, a shrivelled little woman, with a sharp tongue, and a waspish disposition; "they was all for hushing it up, and for sayin' as the poor man would have died that minute, whether Mr. Raymond Lester and his bicycle had been there or not. A pack o' lies, I says; an' if it had been a poor man on that bike, someone would have said so, straight out in the coroner's face. I haven't no patience with this truckling to rich people, an' making out as their vices are nowt but virtues gone to seed."

"Your husband was on the jury, and the verdict was unanimous; why don't you go and pitch into him about it?" panted Mrs. Dewe, who, with a child upon each arm, had just arrived, breathless, but eager.

"Why would he have died?" asked Mrs. Lot Godfrey, with a pious ejaculation of thankfulness that the twelve "good men and true" had not seen fit to lay the heaviest blame on her favourite, young Raymond.

"Dr. Trevor swore as it was heart disease," said Mrs. Clupp.

"Them doctors will swear to anything that suits 'em, white's black, and black is any colour you like, with some of 'em; I knows 'em," rejoined Mrs. Joe Smith, with a malicious cackle of laughter, that had the sound of a curse in its unpleasant tones.

"Dr. Trevor ain't that sort," warmly spoke up Mrs. Dewe, who, for all her love of gossip, and not too industrious habits, was a good woman in the main, and a warm admirer of uprightness and integrity in other people.

But Mrs. Joe Smith's shrill laugh broke forth again, and

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ere its echoes had died away, a shadow fell across the threshold, and behind the shadow stood Mrs. Desart.

Presumably she had come straight from the *Hollow Oak*, at the close of the inquiry, like those other women who were gathered in Mrs. Lot Godfrey's kitchen; but her appearance was so unexpected, that it might be said to fairly take away the breath of those who were there before her.

She paused irresolute, on seeing that the mistress of the cottage had visitors, but only for a moment; then, with an involuntary stiffening of her manner, she stepped into the kitchen, and asked if she might go upstairs to see Susan.

"Yes, to be sure, ma'am, and rare pleased the poor thing will be to see you; though it's weaker she is getting every day now," said Mrs. Lot Godfrey, bustling forward to welcome her visitor, and conduct her to Susan's chamber.

The cottage was very old, but so substantially built, that it looked as if it might stand for another hundred years or more, despite the date 1650, that was carved in stone over the entrance door. Some averred that it had been built for a posting inn; others, that the famous hermit of Stillwater had erected it as a refuge, when he forsook the pleasures of this world, and gave himself up to meditation and prayer. Whether or no this was the case, certain it was that the walls were inordinately thick, and the staircase that led to the room above was formed of solid slabs of stone, laid in a cement so unyielding that two hundred and odd years had not served to make it crumble, or show signs of decay.

Up these stone steps went the old lady, followed by Mrs. Desart, whilst the three women left below, sat on in a strained expectancy of they knew not what, until the tension was broken for them by the shrill crying of one of Mrs. Dewe's babies, and under cover of the noise of its wailing, their tongues were unloosed once more.

The room above was larger than the one below, by

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reason that it extended over the tiny pantry, and equally small scullery; it was lofty too, for the style of cottage to which it belonged, a wide, pleasant room, with two windows, and containing an old-fashioned four-post bed, upon which lay Susan Godfrey.

And she had so lain for twenty-five years past, hopelessly paralyzed from some injury to the spine when a girl in her early teens. Yet, despite her heavy affliction, no one had ever heard a repining word from her, or any complaint over the hardness of her lot.

A bright, comely face had Susan, etherealized somewhat by the confinement and introspection of her life, and from the same cause, refined and cultured far above the average of her class. There was no appearance of speedy dissolution about her, either, though the doctor had declared her days to be numbered, owing to some complication of symptoms that had lately arisen, and which had produced spells of wearing pain, and intense suffering in the poor body that was so helpless.

But she was comparatively free from pain when her mother ushered Mrs. Desart into the room, and she greeted her visitor with a beaming smile of delighted surprise. "Oh, ma'am, I'm sure I never expected the pleasure of seeing you here to-day," she exclaimed, putting out a thin, white hand in welcome.

"Why not, Susan?" asked Mrs. Desart a little brusquely. The inquest had been a fierce ordeal for her, and she had not yet regained complete composure.

A drift of delicate colour surged into the face of the invalid, making her for the moment almost beautiful. Mrs. Desart's question had embarrassed her, although as a rule, she was ready of speech, and not easily confused or perturbed. "I was thinking you would not care to meet curious eyes to-day, ma'am, nor yet to be troubled with the affairs of other people, when your own must call for so many sad thoughts."

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"Ah!" ejaculated the lady, in a peculiar tone, and then she sat down on the wooden chair by the bedside, and stared at the flowers in the window for a time in silence, as if the bright hues of the tulips blooming there, might help out the tangle of her thoughts.

Mrs. Lot Godfrey slipped quietly away down stairs, and left them alone together. She was in the habit of doing this, in an ordinary way, when Mrs. Desart came to see Susan; but to-day, the clatter of tongues arising from below, warned her that her presence was desirable there, to check the exceeding loquaciousness of her uninvited guests, and speed their going, if she could.

Susan's chamber was the village sanctuary. Did any poor soul find herself, or himself, driven half-distracted by beleaguering cares, what was easier than to speed away to this temple of peace, and pour it all into the ears of the woman lying under the white canopy of the old four-post bed, whose wisdom of consolation had been learned in the secret hiding place of the saints, where God, Himself, is the instructor?

Yet, cheery and ready of speech as she was, when the world swung on in its usual way, her words were very few and slow to come when trouble was to the fore, but those that did come had the force of inspiration with them, and such words go a long way.

Mrs. Desart was in her ordinary walking dress, that Susan Godfrey had seen scores of times before, the lady being a very frequent visitor at the cottage; but there was nothing in the blue serge dress, fawn-coloured jacket, or blue felt hat, to suggest mourning, much less widowhood, and the chorus downstairs was at that moment swelling louder, and louder, over the omission.

Susan heard it, and the drifting colour crimsoned her face and brow. How brutal Mrs. Desart must think them all, and how the plainly-audible words must sting! So the woman on the bed suffered for the woman sitting on the

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chair; and when the pain became intolerable to be borne, she spoke. "Did mother leave that door open, ma'am?"

Mrs. Desart craned her head a little to look round the screen that stood in front of the door, to shield the invalid from the draughts sweeping up from below.

"I think not, Susan," she said in an indifferent tone. "But it is very easy to hear what they are saying downstairs, for all that, is it not? No wonder they talk loudly, either, is it? For you must remember that it is a novelty to them, poor simple souls, to see a newly-made widow in a blue serge frock, and a fawn coat, to say nothing of the blue hat. And they are wondering, too, if I shall go to the funeral, and hold a handkerchief to my eyes when the clods rattle in upon the coffin—" here a hysterical laugh rose in her throat, and stopped her bitter words.

"Don't, dear, don't; it hurts me," pleaded the woman on the bed, in an imploring tone, whilst the slow tears welled up in her eyes, rolling in great drops down her cheeks.

Alice Desart turned impulsively, and leaning over the bed, dropped a penitent kiss on the invalid's forehead. "I'll be good, Susan, and not say anything more to make you cry. But what can they expect, those women downstairs, and all the rest of the gossiping sisterhood here in Stillwater? Do they put me on a level with that poor little wife of Barney Scott's, I wonder? Don't you remember how he used to kick, and beat her, even turning her out into the garden in her nightdress, when he came home drunk? Yet, when he died in delirium tremens, last Christmas, the poor little creature pawned her bed to buy a widow's bonnet with a long crape weeper hanging down behind—" and again the gasping, hysterical laughter choked Mrs. Desart's utterances.

"But they had loved each other once, and Barney wasn't cruel except when he was in drink. When he was dead, it was the love Tilly Scott remembered, not the kicking and the cruelty. It is so sometimes, you know," rejoined Susan,

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in an apologetic tone, as if defending Mrs. Scott's too forgiving disposition.

Mrs. Desart groaned, and her face went hard and stern, and when she spoke again, her breath came in quick, short pants, as if she struggled with hardly repressed emotion. "There is where the difference lies, only those women downstairs don't know it, and I have not the courage to tell them—perhaps they wouldn't understand it if I did. Leon never cared for me like that; I thought he did, and gave him of my heart's best love, deeming him worthy of it, and myself honoured in the giving. But it was not my love that he wanted, only my money."

"Poor soul!" murmured Susan, gently patting the hand that rested in hers, and with a thrill of thanksgiving in her heart for the mercies of her own lot; if hers had been a denied life, at least she had been spared the anguish of betrayal.

"I was Aunt Caroline's heiress, with a prospect of speedy inheritance, but Leon was poor, and we knew it was of no use to ask her consent, so we were secretly betrothed, and waited for her death. It was long in coming, as such deaths often are. Leon got tired of waiting, and urged a secret marriage. I was willing enough, for I loved him, and deemed the world well lost for his dear sake. Then Aunt Caroline discovered the secret on the very day the wedding took place, living just long enough afterwards to alter her will and disinherit me, before she died from the shock that the knowledge of my undutiful conduct brought to her; for she had been as a mother to me, the only mother I had ever known."

"And to think of her being, as you may say, only the wife of a common tramp," broke in the strident voice of Mrs. Joe Smith, from below.

"Oh, ma'am, that door, I'm sure it can't be shut," pleaded poor Susan from the bed.

But Mrs. Desart only laughed in a grim fashion. "Never

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mind, Susan, let them talk; it is their nature, and they enjoy it. Hurt me? Not a bit of it. I've had so many hurting things in my time that I have become case-hardened."

"Not even a black ribbon on her hat!" It was Mrs. Joe Smith's voice again, the shrill, strident voice that carried so far; and at the sound, poor, helpless Susan wrung her hands and wept aloud.

"Hush, hush, Susan, don't grieve like that, dear; it will make you worse," Alice Desart said, her voice kind and gentle now, as when one soothes a frightened child; and rising, she crossed the room with a quick, determined step, shut the door with a resounding bang, that was intended to come as a hint of warning to the gossiping women downstairs, then stole softly back to the bedside, and sinking on her knees, laid her head upon the pillow, beside Susan's.

"Why is it that you feel for me like that, Susan? Who am I, that you should put yourself in my place, and grieve over my sorrows?"

Susan sobbed unrestrainedly for a few minutes; she was so weak that it was not easy to keep her emotions under control. Then she replied, "It is the only way, ma'am, if you are going to be any comfort to your friends, I take it. Doesn't our Saviour do the very same thing—put Himself in our place, suffering in our stead? Surely His servants should follow their Master so?"

"I don't know, Susan; I'm not well up in things pertaining to the Kingdom, but now, if I am a free woman, and lifted out of this horrible trouble that has darkened my life, I shall be a Christian, because I shall be able to believe in the mercy and goodness of God."

"Couldn't you believe in it before, ma'am, when the trouble was at its darkest?" asked Susan, in a yearning tone.

Mrs. Desart shook her head, and her face wore a hard, grey look. "No, I could not, Susan; some troubles are

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sent for discipline, but there was no question of Christian chastening in my lot. It was too hideous for anything;" and strong shivering shook her frame as she crouched closer and closer to the woman on the bed.

"Why?" The doubt in Susan's tone was plainly evident.

"I cannot tell you all. It is too dreadful to be put into words. When he taunted, gibed, and sneered, I bore it; when he beat me, I kept silence; but when he sought to make me vile, that he might live at ease, I ran away, and left him."

"Quite right, too; I'd have done the same myself," and Susan's tones thrilled with indignation.

But Mrs. Desart crouched lower still, sobbing, sighing, shivering, as if the dead man at the *Hollow Oak* had power yet to sear her life with his baleful presence.

"Ah, poor thing, poor thing! But he's dead now; take heart, take heart," and Susan patted the bowed head with a loving hand, while tears of sympathy wet her cheeks.

A wild impulse came over Alice Desart to unburden her heart yet more fully to this woman, whose wisdom was not of earth; she yearned to pour out her soul before her, to tell her everything. And well had it been for her had she yielded to the impulse then; many and many a bitter after hour had been spared to her, maybe, in the days that were yet unborn.

A moment more, and she had yielded to the longing; her lips were even moving to falter forth the first fateful word, when open came the door, and in walked Mrs. Lot Godfrey, her wrinkled face in a pucker of pitiful distress.

"I'm sore grieved, ma'am, that it should have fallen out so; the women mean well enough, poor souls, but the length of their tongues is simply too dreadful to be thought of. I've cleared them all out now, though it was hard work making them understand that they had better go," and the old woman paused for want of breath.

Mrs. Desart's hour of fate—nay, it was but a moment

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for length—had come and passed, and she rose to her feet with the weary air of one who is terribly exhausted from some long and wearing mental struggle. "Never mind, Mrs. Godfrey, I must expect to be a nine days' wonder, you know; but when that is over they will forget all about me."

"Are you going, ma'am?" asked Susan, seeing that the lady had risen to her feet, and was straightening her disordered hat and hair.

"Yes, Susan, and you won't see me again for a few weeks, for Mrs. Wynter and I are starting for Torquay the first thing to-morrow morning," she answered, in her ordinary tone.

Susan looked surprised, but said nothing. Mrs. Lot Godfrey was less discreet.

"It is sudden, isn't it, ma'am? Jane said nothing about it when she came to pay for the washing last week."

"Yes, very sudden. But then, many of Mrs. Wynter's movements are, you know. Besides, I really believe that she is going on my account this time, to take me out of the chattering comments of my neighbours. It is very kind of her; I only wish I could make her understand how very little I care about it all—the talk, I mean," and Mrs. Desart threw up her head with a defiant air.

Susan sighed, though no one, not even the mother who was devoted to her, heeded it, or guessed the sharp pang of renunciation that smote her faithful heart then. All the love of her intensely loving nature had gone out to Mrs. Desart, the lady who, though so much above her in station, had yet come to confide in her so greatly, and to give her love for love.

Mrs. Desart stooped, and kissed her. "Good-bye, Susan. I will write you such long letters, and bring you home as many photographs as I can afford to buy."

Susan did not speak, only returned the kiss with unusual fervour. It was as if she had put all her yearning love into

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that last embrace. And it was the last, for in less than two weeks from that day her summons had come, and her willing feet, made strong for the journey, had stepped into the flooding waters of the river of death, finding, despite the raging of the current, firm foothold there, and had crossed as on dry land.

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CHAPTER IV.

Stillwater Priors.

A RAMBLING, roomy mansion once, a comfortable and unpretentious farmhouse now, Stillwater Priors had been in the possession of the Lester family for five generations, or more.

Mark Lester was the present proprietor; left a widower some six years previously, his home had since that event been managed, or more correctly speaking, mismanaged, by his half-sister, Miss Keziah Dawe, a lady of uncertain age, and a temper of the same. A well-meaning woman doubtless, but one in no way fitted to have the management of a houseful of bright, healthy children, like the young Lesters, who were about as full of fun and mischief as such children are wont to be.

Raymond was the eldest, having just passed his seventeenth birthday; after him came Ethel, a slim, attractive girl, a year younger, and who was already beginning to give herself grown-up airs, and to look forward with sighing eagerness to the time when she should be her own mistress, and free from the rasping rule of her aunt Keziah.

There were three younger children—Donald, a mischievous pickle of thirteen, who was in himself sufficient to turn anyone's hair grey, as Miss Dawe often averred; then came Theodore, a pale-faced boy of nine, who thus far had halted through life helped by a pair of crutches; and Daisy, the youngest, a wilful, spoiled little damsel of seven; a sweet, and lovable child enough, but a handful, without any doubt.

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Over this family of five, Miss Dawe hovered with untiring and zealous devotion, but she could no more control or influence them as she wished to do, than she could fly, and the feeling of her own capacity did but tend to the still further souring of her temper.

There had been a fine uproar and confusion one day, a week or two after the tragic episode of Leon Desart's death; and Miss Dawe, who, as usual, had been worsted in the encounter, came to lay her case with tears and lamentations before the master of the house.

He was well used to this sort of appeal, and prepared himself to give a patient hearing to the complaints the greatly perturbed lady had to lay before him. Some of them were trivial, and their very slightness and triviality annoyed him; a big thing he could have dealt with promptly and wisely; but these little pin-pricks in the fair page of his domestic peace, were becoming intolerable to be borne with equanimity, and he had a vexed, bored air that brought his sister's indignation into a speedy, tearful collapse.

"I am so sorry to have to vex you like this, Mark, but I can no more control those children, than I can control the wind. If only you would find some sensible woman, and marry her, I could go home to Josiah, and live at peace."

At these words a sudden change came over the man's gloomy face, and his voice had an eager ring in it when he answered: "That is just what I have been thinking of doing, Keziah, only it seemed full soon to be talking of it yet."

She gave a little gasp of surprise; all these years had she been begging and imploring Mark to get married again, even growing angry at his obstinacy in the matter; and now, when such an event was actually recommending itself to him as desirable, a sudden revulsion of distaste was produced in her breast—such an envious, inconstant thing is human nature!

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"Who is it, Mark?" she asked, pressing her hand upon her heart to stay its sudden fluttering.

He hesitated a minute, growing red and bashful as a young man with his first love; then he asked a question in his turn: "You can keep a secret, I suppose, Keziah?"

"If you are afraid to trust me, don't tell me; you'll be safe that way," she retorted brusquely, her anger rising again, her heart beating more wildly than before, whilst a feeling of actual terror took possession of her, at what she was going to hear.

"It isn't that I am afraid of your talking about it outside, but it does not seem fair to discuss her in such a relation, before she has been even asked whether she would care to take the position."

"Tell me, whom are you thinking of; is it Eliza Perry, or—or Harriet Grainger?" she demanded in a sharp tone, cutting his previous sentences short, as if impatient with his dallying.

"It is Mrs. Desart," he rejoined, drawing himself up and looking down on Keziah, a tender smile hovering round his mouth, whilst a happy light shone in his eyes.

"Not that tramp's wife? Good gracious! Mark Lester, what can you be thinking about?" cried Miss Dawe, in a panic.

"Not his wife, but his widow," corrected the man, his head still up in the air, and a whole world of triumph, of gladness and of joy, radiating from his face.

Miss Dawe sniffed. "It's all the same; she was his wife once, if she's his widow now. Mark, she is no fit wife for you; don't marry her, dear; don't, I implore you!"

"Why not?" he asked in great surprise, totally failing to understand her mood, which was solemn now.

"I can't tell you, Mark; I don't know myself, but I *feel* it in my heart, and something within me tells me that if you marry Alice Desart, you will wed with trouble."

Mark Lester threw back his head with a ringing laugh,

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which mightily offended Miss Dawe, who, was besides, secretly ashamed of her own display of emotion.

"You are bilious, Keziah, and in need of a black draught, to talk like that. Trouble will come, doubtless, as it does into all lives; but there will be two to meet it, instead of one," he said, when his merriment had subsided sufficiently for speech.

"We shall see," she rejoined sourly, hurt beyond measure that he should laugh at her fears.

"But you will do nothing to prevent it, Keziah; you will not try to prejudice her against me?" he said, becoming suddenly grave and anxious.

"Where would be the use, I should like to know, for an old maid to try and interfere between two people who had made up their minds to get married? It is only in story books that kind of thing is successful, and then not always."

Mark Lester looked relieved, but he did not say anything, and presently Miss Dawe spoke again.

"Mrs. Desart is a churchwoman, Mark; have you thought of that?"

"Yes; but I do not see that it ought to make any difference to our love. My wife can go to church if she chooses, whilst I go to Clorpe chapel; or she may even choose to come with me; I shall not alter."

"I did not suppose you would," snapped Miss Keziah; "but a house divided against itself is apt to drop to pieces, for all that the head of it remains true to his own ideas of right and wrong."

"The house wouldn't be divided against itself, not if the heads agreed to differ," persisted Mark, stoutly.

"The children would drift away to church, Mark; Ethel leans that way now; and think for yourself what a trial that would have been to Martha, if she had lived," pleaded Miss Dawe.

Mark Lester's brow clouded. The most patient of men might have found this sort of thing trying, and he was not

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one of that class by a very long way. "If Ethel hankers after going to church, she will go, whether I marry a churchwoman, or the most uncompromising dissenter that ever existed, and why shouldn't she, if her convictions trend that way? Provided my children grow up with the fear of the Lord in their hearts, and strive to walk in His footsteps here below, I care not by what name they are called, nor to which section of the Church they belong."

Miss Dawe raised no further objection then, beginning dimly to realize the futility of any remonstrances that she could frame. Her brother had always been resolute and determined, when he once made up his mind to any course of action, as she knew well, and he would hardly be less obstinate in a case of this kind, where an affair of the heart was involved.

The Lesters of Stillwater Priors had always been dissenters; "pillars of the church" at the little Independent chapel at Clorpe, most of them—though Mark's own father had gone a step further, and developed into a Plymouth Brother, with unending theological crochets, and a fresh view with regard to the "Book" for every day in the year.

Mark himself was a particularly bright and shining light. Lacking his father's crochets, he yet inherited the old man's ardent zeal in things spiritual, with his great reverence for the Bible and its teachings. He was senior deacon of the community at Clorpe, though he was in years the youngest member of the diaconate. He was also a guardian of the poor for Stillwater, and, strangest anomaly of all, he was rector's churchwarden for the parish, too.

That this was so, was the result of his close friendship with the Rev. Samuel Knotley, who held the living; but it was sufficiently remarkable, and raised considerable comment from strangers and outsiders. No one in Stillwater thought the arrangement peculiar, however; to them it was

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the most natural and fitting thing, that the master of the Priors should be the right-hand helper of the rector, seeing that the house at the Priors stood close to the church and the rectory, those three places being isolated by nearly half-a-mile of country lane from the village proper.

The Priors had never been, as its name implied, a religious house, but was so called because the house, and the land attached to it, had been given as a thankoffering by Henry VII., to the monks of Stillwater, to be held by them as a source of revenue. It remained in possession of the church, until sturdy Oliver arose to work reform in the land, when it became the property of a private gentleman, who elevated it into a fortified mansion, the fortifications consisting mainly in the digging of a deep moat, water being by a long way the cheapest means of defence in Stillwater, for most of the months in every year.

Some people there were who declared that the moat had been dug not merely as a protection from foes outside, so much as a precautionary measure against the dampness of the site on which the house was built, and which it was supposed very effectually to drain. Be that as it might, the moat was there encircling the place still, and the house was reckoned the driest and healthiest in the parish.

The church and rectory stood side by side on higher ground, embosomed in trees for the most part, though here and there wide glimpses might be had of the rich stretches of corn and pasture land, and in the distance the towering hills of northern Fordshire.

Ford itself, the county town, was further away to the south-east, hidden behind a range of lower hills covered with bosky woods, wherein the flowers were springing just now, to herald the coming of summer, and to ring in the lengthening days with a myriad of soundless bells, in hues of red, white, and blue, and of perfumes as divers as their shapes.

But if Miss Keziah Dawe had seen the uselessness of

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further reasoning with her brother on the question of the marriage he had come to desire so strongly, she was not one bit more reconciled to it in her heart; indeed, the sudden repugnance which she had conceived to the idea when it was first mooted, deepened, and grew stronger as the days went on.

Mrs. Wynter and her companion were away at this time, or doubtless Miss Keziah would have paid a speedy visit to the Limes, to satisfy herself, if she could, as to the reasonableness or otherwise of her objection to her brother's choice. As it was, there was nothing to be done, but to wait; and that, to a person of Miss Dawe's particular temperament, was about the hardest thing she could have to do.

Meanwhile, she watched her brother, and his growing hope for the future, with very complicated feelings, one day glad to think he had at last resolved to marry, and so relieve her of her heavy responsibility; the next day filled with repugnance at the very idea. And under this mental see-saw, her temper, and her health likewise, became considerably worsened, as was only to be expected.

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CHAPTER V.

Mrs. Desart's Return.

THE weeks passed on. May came and went; June, glorious with roses, merged into July; the grass crops fell before the sharp scythes of the mowers, and the meadows were raked clear of the dried and fragrant hay, before Mrs. Wynter came back to the Limes, bringing Alice Desart with her.

Their long absence had been due to other causes than the desire to escape the village wonderment over Leon's death. At first Mrs. Desart had been ill, broken down, so it seemed, with the strain of all she had previously had to bear. When she recovered, Mrs. Wynter fell sick with an attack of jaundice, which she declared to be due to her stay at Torquay, insisting that the place did not suit her.

So soon as she was sufficiently recovered to bear the fatigue of travelling, they left Torquay, journeying by easy stages to a remote watering-place on the Welsh coast, where they settled down for quiet weeks of slow-coming convalescence. Mrs. Wynter was better there; a more bracing air, less bustle and stir of active life about her, and total freedom from anything in the nature of friction, seemed to work for her the cure that doctors and medicine failed to produce.

How the change and the monotonous quiet suited Mrs. Desart, did not appear; but she gained in bodily strength, and the faint colour of returning health bloomed again in her cheeks, until Mrs. Wynter openly commented on her good looks; but her eyes were unsatisfied still, and her

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pillow, night after night, was wet with tears. At the mention of a return to Stillwater, she shivered with cold apprehension, and one day gave Mrs. Wynter a very plain intimation that she would like to leave her employment.

But Mrs. Wynter flatly refused to let her go, urging, and rightly enough, that in no other place could she be so well off at the present time, as under the roof, or at least in the charge, of the old friend who knew more of the sorrowful past than any other living person. Mrs. Desart gave way under the pressure, and consented to remain; but it was easy to see that she was neither happy nor at ease, and the sight of her unrest stirred her protector into a state of querulous resentment at her ingratitude, which was good for neither health nor temper just then. A relapse followed, and for a week or two the old lady's life hung in the balance, Mrs. Desart nursing her night and day with untiring zeal and devotion.

One morning, when some improvement had set in, and she was really mending again, Mrs. Desart left her in charge of the landlady, and went for a much-needed breath of fresh air. Just outside the house she met the postman, and, enquiring if there were any letters for her, had put into her hand an envelope that appeared to have travelled considerably, so worn and soiled was it, and covered with postmarks and re-directions.

She clutched it eagerly, and, with a hasty word of thanks, sped onward to a solitary place on the sea-shore that she knew of, there to break open the envelope, and read for herself what was contained therein.

Good news it must have been, for she fell on her knees there on the hard, pebbly beach, and with clasped hands and streaming eyes gave thanks to God. How long it was since she had been able to pray with such whole-hearted fervour. Perhaps, indeed, she had never before poured out her soul to the Highest thus. And in the relief and exaltation of her mood, it was little wonder either that she

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mistook the feeling for the new birth, and deemed herself that moment converted, that is, made anew in Christ through the power of His saving grace.

A long time she stayed there, dimly conscious all the while of sunshine and sweet breezes all around her, of the thunder and dash of the long Atlantic rollers as they broke on the pebbly shore, and the song of a skylark somewhere in the blue above her.

Presently, remembrance of the duties she was neglecting came to her, and rising in haste she hurried back to the terrace on the sea-front, where Mrs. Wynter had rooms.

That lady was full of reproaches that she had been left so long; but Alice Desart scarcely heard them, as she moved here and there, straightening this thing and that, and giving to the lodging-house furniture as much a look of homely comfort as was in its nature to wear.

Then, half unconsciously, she broke into a song, nothing very loud or imposing; just a ballad, with a lilting refrain, that she had sung when a girl, and, perhaps, hardly thought of since. But the burden of her care was lifted now, leaving her as wholly light-hearted as she had been in those other days, and that was why she sang.

"You are cheerful to-day, Alice," remarked the old lady, in a rather complaining tone. She felt anything but light-hearted or happy herself, and was disposed to resent the condition in her companion.

Mrs. Desart came over to the couch where Mrs. Wynter was lying, and began to pat up the pillows with deft fingers.

"It is such a beautiful day; one cannot help being the better for it. Dear Mrs. Wynter, do let me order round a Bath chair, and take you for an airing; I am sure it will do you good," she coaxed, in persuasive tones.

"Too much trouble," sighed the invalid, turning her weary eyes to the window.

"It will be no trouble whatever. I will bring your bonnet here, and everything else that you want; and we will carry

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you out to the chair, if you like," Mrs. Desart rejoined, cheerfully.

Mrs. Wynter succumbed to the temptation presently, though she was feeling so wretchedly unwell that even walking across the room was an effort too wearying to be contemplated. But it seemed easier, in the face of her companion's importunities, to give way than to resist, and so she yielded.

The air did her good, too, and though she was tired to exhaustion when she came back, a rest took the weariness away, and left her the stronger for the exertion.

"Alice, I am sure that I am getting better again; and as soon as I get a little stronger, I want to go home. It is this long exile from home and home comforts that is keeping me so weak."

Mrs. Desart gave a nervous start, turning her head quickly to hide the burning crimson flushing over neck and brow. Her hands trembled, too, and her voice was a little unsteady as she replied, "Yes; perhaps the old familiar life will be better for you now, and we have been away a long time."

Mrs. Wynter looked up sharply, and with considerable surprise in her glance. Hitherto, Mrs. Desart had done her utmost to delay their return, and the sudden change of front was inexplicable to the elder woman.

The companion's face, however, was calm and impassive. The blushes had faded, leaving it paler than its wont even, and there was nothing to be learned from it that Mrs. Wynter's eyes had power to read.

"I want to go home," she said, with a desperate yearning in her tone, which filled Alice Desart with instant self-reproach.

"You shall go, then. Why did you not say before how badly you were pining for Stillwater?"

"What would have been the use, when you had set your face so steadily against going back?" queried the invalid in her turn, and her voice was grim and uncompromising.

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Mrs. Desart laughed. Her face was crimsoning again, and she must do something to keep it from the range of those keen old eyes that were so searching in their gaze. "You might have gone without me," she said, in a low tone.

"Which I did not choose to do," the other retorted, sharply.

A week later they went home.

It was Mrs. Desart who wrote to the servants to announce their coming, giving those flurried domestics barely time to have the house ready for the reception of its invalid mistress, and none at all in which to spread the news abroad in the village.

Thus it came to pass that no one, not even the rector, knew of their intended return until it had been an accomplished fact for a day or two.

Mrs. Wynter was not pleased at what she chose to call the rector's neglect of his flock; and when their second day at home had drawn on towards evening, she sent Mrs. Desart with a peremptory message to the rectory, stating that she was unwell, and would be glad if Mr. Knotley would visit her as soon as he could.

This commission Mrs. Desart undertook only under compulsion, and set out upon her errand wishing herself anywhere rather than where she was, and feeling every moment as though she must turn and run away. Of course she did not do anything so foolish, but walked along that dusty half-mile of highway between the village and the church, with as calm a bearing as though merely taking a stroll that had not so much as the ghost of a heart-thrill in its possibilities.

The nearest, and most commonly used, way to the rectory, was past the lower gateway of the Priors; the other and longer route lay through the churchyard, and it was this second road that Mrs. Desart took, telling herself as she went that her object in going by that path was merely to see where Susan Godfrey lay buried; refusing to

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acknowledge even to herself that her avoidance of the other way was because she was afraid lest she might chance to meet Mark Lester.

Entering the churchyard by the little side gate in the wall, she went soberly along the path, past the humble green mounds that marked the resting-places of the Still-water dead, when, turning a corner, she found herself suddenly confronted with a tombstone she had never seen before.

Right in front of her it stood, aggressively new, aggressively white, and with bold, black lettering, which might be read the whole length of the graveyard:

Sacred to the Memory of

Leon Desart,

Who died April —— 18—.

"Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."

A sharp cry escaped her, forced from her by the unexpected sight, and for a moment she stood irresolute, white and shivering.

What was there in the sight to scare her so, to drive the blood from her face, and leave her breathless and panting?

Only its unexpectedness, probably; for a moment later she had recovered, and moved on with a steady step to meet the rector, who was just then turning the corner of the church.

He was amazed to see her, greeting her with a degree of unbelieving astonishment that would have been laughable had Mrs. Desart been in the mood to be amused.

"Mr. Knotley, who put that up?" she asked, in a brusque tone, waving her hand towards the glaring white stone, with its enigmatical text.

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The rector looked surprised. "I—I certainly thought you did it," he answered, greatly puzzled.

"I? What an idea! I have no money to spend on monumental finery of that description. My salary is ten pounds a year, with laundress thrown in," and she laughed hysterically to hide her emotion.

"But the impression I received in the matter was that you had given the order, or left instructions for it to be given," persisted the clergyman.

"I did not. Was it likely that I should, even with the financial difficulty left out of the question, seeing that I do not wear black for my late husband?" and she glanced with a half-apology down at the pretty blue and white cotton frock she was wearing.

But he shook his head with an air of bewilderment, like one out of his depth, and afraid to go further, lest he plunge in yet deeper.

"That reminds me," she went on, staring now full at the stone, which glared back again, whilst the lettering seemed to sear itself into her brain; "who paid the funeral expenses, Mr. Knotley; the parish?"

"No, certainly not. Mr. Lester did that; young Raymond's misadventure laid him open to so much expense, surely." The rector's tone was gently protesting, and Mrs. Desart brought her gaze back from the stone to look at him.

"Did Mr. Lester buy the stone also, and—and choose the text?" she demanded, demurely, a gleam of something almost like fun showing a moment in her eyes.

The rector was distinctly embarrassed, but he had no choice save to answer, "I understood that the order for the monument emanated from you. Mr. Lester did not say it in so many words; it was the impression I gathered; it was my mistake, of course, for Mark Lester would not tell a lie."

"No, nor live one, either," she replied, in a dreamy tone,

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her eyes brightening and her colour growing deeper. Then she recovered herself, delivered Mrs. Wynter's message in her ordinary tone, and enquired if the rector would walk back with her then.

"With pleasure, but first you must come and speak to Mrs. Knotley; she will not forgive me else, because you must know that you are a great favourite of hers," and he laughed in his kindly way as they walked together along the remaining bit of the churchyard path, across the rectory lawn, and in at the open windows of Mrs. Knotley's drawing-room.

The rector's wife, a cheery, comfortable little woman, absolutely unpretentious, but sweet and easy to live with, beyond the average of women, rose up at their entrance and came forward to greet them, whilst a tall, slim girl, in a white frock, who had been crouched on a low stool at her feet, jumped up also, with a laugh of embarrassment at being so discovered.

"It is so strange that you should come in like this, for we were talking of you, Ethel and I," Mrs. Knotley said, as she shook hands with her visitor.

"I hope you were saying nothing particularly horrid, or my ears will be burning all the way back to the village," retorted Mrs. Desart, with a laugh, though she flushed uncomfortably, for the girl in the white frock was Mark Lester's daughter.

"No, indeed, Mrs. Desart, it was nothing in the least horrid. I was only telling Mrs. Knotley how much Raymond was dreading your return," Ethel said, in an apologetic tone.

"Raymond—why should he dread it?" exclaimed Mrs. Desart, in surprise; and then, because the probable reason flashed into her mind, she became uncomfortably embarrassed, like the other.

"Raymond says that he feels like a murderer," murmured Ethel, in a low tone.

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"He need not. Accidents will happen, and the coroner's jury did not censure him over-much," Mrs. Desart rejoined, rather coldly; and then she asked the rector if he were ready, the two starting soon after, and leaving Mrs. Knotley and Ethel to resume their interrupted talk.

But they did not get back to it from the same standpoint. Mrs. Desart was the theme still, only the talk had changed its course.

"How happy she looks; did you notice, Mrs. Knotley?" exclaimed Ethel, almost wonderingly.

"Yes, I did, and that the baffled, disappointed expression had quite gone from her eyes. My dear, what a pretty woman she is!"

"Her frocks always look nice, but I never thought of her face as being pretty before," admitted Ethel, frankly. Then she rose to go, and Mrs. Knotley strolled with her as far as the lower gate of the Priors, where the carriage drive went round over the bridge of the moat.

They lingered there a few minutes, talking of inconsequent things, for the evening was pleasant, and they were very good friends indeed, despite the efforts of Miss Keziah Dawe to keep them apart. And as they stood chatting, Mark Lester came riding at a leisurely pace along the road from Clorpe, where he had been on some errand of business.

Mrs. Knotley stayed to speak to him; then turned slowly back towards the rectory, whilst Ethel walked by the side of the horse, and talked to her father.

"Do you know," she said suddenly, "Mrs. Wynter has come back, and Mrs. Desart called at the rectory this evening?"

"Ah!" Mark Lester gave a start, and his heart throbbed in blissful expectancy. "When did they return?"

But Ethel was not sure on that score—could not even say whether she had heard it mentioned. Then she plunged into a description of how Mrs. Desart had looked,

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what she had said, and finally repeated Mrs. Knotley's pronouncement of her being a very pretty woman; but her father listened in silence, until the house was reached, when he said hurriedly, almost impatiently, it seemed to his daughter:

"Ethel, call Jones to take the mare. I must walk down to the Limes at once, and say welcome home to—to Mrs. Wynter!"

"You are so tired to-night, father, and besides, the rector has gone there," she urged.

"I am not tired. And I shall not eat the rector, nor will he, in his turn, devour me," he answered, with a preoccupied smile.

"I never supposed for a moment that you had cannibal proclivities, daddy; I have no hankering after man-meat myself, and heredity goes for something, don't you know. But if you must go to the Limes to-night, let me go with you."

"No, no, child! you can go to-morrow. I've got some things to see after, that may keep me late; and seeing I'm going to the village, I may as well attend to them now, as leave them for to-morrow," he retorted hastily, as though anxious to pay his visit unaccompanied.

Ethel said no more, but stood looking after him until he disappeared from sight.

Just then Raymond came round the corner of the house. "Hullo, Ethel, what are you star-gazing at?" he demanded, in the free-and-easy tone which is the prerogative of brothers.

She turned slowly. "I was looking after father, Ray. I can't make him out at all to-night."

"Very likely not. You are not very sharp, you know," he retorted, with great candour.

But she forbore resentment, answering instead, in a mysterious tone, "He is so absorbed, and his face is quite beautiful with happiness; Ray, I believe he is in love!"

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"Fiddlesticks!" cried the youth, in a contemptuous tone. "What a sentimental little idiot you are, Ethel! Father in love, forsooth! You will say I'm afflicted with the same complaint next. Ridiculous!"

"We shall see what we shall see," she retorted with a Sphinx-like gravity of expression, and refused to say any more.

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CHAPTER VI.

The Wooing of Alice.

THE garden at the Limes was large, and well kept. There was, of course, that same absence of fine dividing lines of distinction between flowers and vegetables, which is a common feature of old-fashioned gardens in remote country places; but it was a very charming place, sweet, fresh, and fragrant, despite the drawback of the lavender being planted on the onion bed, and the sweet peas having to cling to the gooseberry bushes to aid them in their endeavour to hold up their heads in the world.

Mrs. Desart was in the garden, flitting here and there among the flowers in a peculiarly restless fashion. Her visit to the rectory had unnerved her, and she had come into the garden in order to grow calm again, and to still, if she could, the fluttering of her pulses, and the agitated beating of her heart.

The rector was with Mrs. Wynter, and it was characteristic of the old lady to banish her companion when she had a visitor; for once Mrs. Desart was grateful for this peculiarity on the part of her employer, although there had been times without number when she had chafed bitterly at being ordered from the room like an unruly child, the moment callers made their appearance.

Up and down the trim gravel paths she paced, avoiding that part of the garden visible from the windows or the avenue, and keeping only to the remoter parts where she was hidden from sight. The gloaming was coming on, and the odours of the flowers mingling with the fragrance of a late hay crop in the meadow beyond the garden, added to the charm of the twilight hour among the flowers. Mrs. Desart reached the meadow limit of the path between the

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raspberry canes, and swinging slowly round, was amazed to see someone standing on the gravel quite close to her, although she had heard no sound of approaching footsteps.

No need to peer closer through the warm shadow of the gloaming to discover who the intruder was. The wild beating of her heart, and the burning tide of her blushes, were identification enough, and her voice faltered with embarrassment, as with outstretched hand she stepped forward to greet the intruder. "Mr. Lester, how did you find your way out here?"

"I came to see you," he answered quietly, taking her hand and retaining it.

Her face grew crimson under his scrutiny, then paled to a ghastly white. The words she longed, yet dreaded to hear, were trembling on his lips already, and her woman's wit had read them there.

"Alice, you know why I have come?" he asked, standing in front of her, his hands firmly grasping both of hers now, whilst the raspberry canes bowed their heads in approval, and a breeze from the cornfields sighed itself out with a plaintive whisper in their midst.

But she did not answer; only stood before him with a bowed head, the colour coming slowly back into her face again. "There is no one to come between us now, Alice, and I love you," he went on, his voice thrilling with the tenderness of his passion.

No one! And before the mental vision of Mrs. Desart, came the picture of that glaring white tombstone in the churchyard yonder, while the inscription on it seemed to scorch itself into her brain.

She opened her lips to reply, but her mouth was parched and dry, and her tongue felt like a piece of brown paper, whilst her heart beat tumultuously with a curious mixture of hope and fear.

"The shame remains," she murmured at length, in feeble protest.

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"There is no shame to you," he insisted, throwing up his head with a defiant gesture, as if prepared to challenge all creation on her behalf.

"I was his wife," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Just so. But that is past, and now I want to know how soon you will be my wife?" and his grasp of her hands tightened until it almost hurt her.

"Some day, perhaps," she faltered.

"I should prefer something a little more definite, if you please," he retorted, in a lighter tone. "Shall it be next week, or would the week after suit you better?"

"Oh, no; it could not be for a very long time—a year or two," she protested, earnestly, and lifting her eyes for the first time to look into his face.

"And I—what a model of patience you must think me, Alice—could not possibly wait so long for my wife. I want her now—at once," he pleaded, yet in a masterful fashion, that showed how little he dreamed of defeat.

"Then—then, perhaps, you had better ask some one else," she said, freeing her hands with a quick movement, and fleeing incontinently.

He made no attempt at pursuit, but stood quite still on the path, watching her disappear out of sight round the angle of the laurel hedge skirting the lawn.

"It takes a great deal—a very great deal—to kill the coquette in a woman," he remarked, in a musing tone, and then he went round the barrier of laurel hedge by a different path to that taken by Mrs. Desart, and emerging upon the lawn in front of the house, walked up to the door, and rang for admission.

The drawing room was lighted, although the blinds were still undrawn, and from his position on the doorstep, Mark Lester could see the rector bending forward in earnest conversation with Mrs. Wynter, who appeared to be arguing some disputed point with considerable vehemence.

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The servant who came in answer to his ring ushered him at once into the drawing room, where the lady of the house greeted him in characteristic fashion.

"Good evening, Mr. Lester. If I live to go away from Stillwater again, on my return I shall inform my friends of the date of my home-coming in the advertisement columns of the *Fordshire Gazette*."

"Thank you. It will be a very great convenience, I am sure, and one that all of us will appreciate. We shall not then be left to hunt up the information in a haphazard fashion, and get scolded for our delay when we arrive a day too late," he retorted, in an easy tone.

Mr. Knotley laughed. He had seen Mrs. Wynter and his churchwarden cross swords before, and always keenly relished the bloodless warfare in which they indulged.

"I wonder, now, how much trouble you took to discover the date of my return," the old lady said, in a scathing manner.

"I came round once or twice a week to see that everything was going on right in the garden, and each time I came, I asked the servants when you were expected to return; but they were by no means well posted in your movements," he answered.

Mrs. Wynter chuckled. She always became amiable when she was quarrelling with Mark Lester, especially when she deemed that she was getting the best of it. "And who told you that I had returned?" she asked, graciously.

He paused a moment, as if in reflection; then answered, with slow distinctness, "Ethel was at the rectory this evening when Mrs. Desart called there. I heard of your arrival from her, and came at once to see——"

"To see me, I suppose. What a long time it takes you to say a little, Mr. Mark Lester!" snapped the old lady, in an irascible tone.

"No; my visit to-night was primarily to Mrs. Desart,"

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he retorted, with unruffled calm, although he was at the same time keenly conscious of the swift amazement upon the rector's face.

"And pray, what was your business with Mrs. Desart?" demanded Mrs. Wynter, who scented a mystery, and pounced upon it at once, like a cat that turns up a mouse in an unexpected corner.

"I asked her to marry me," he said, with a smile at the astonishment his reply evoked.

"And did she say yes?" gasped Mrs. Wynter, throwing up her hands in consternation, and ready to cry out in dismay at her unlucky fate, which was pursuing her still, causing even the recently-widowed Alice Desart to come under the matrimonial spell that rested upon all her companions.

"She did not say 'No.'"

"Then I will see that she does say it, and that without any further delay. I have had quite enough of marrying among my companions, and I will have no more. Besides, she is not a suitable wife for you, Mr. Mark Lester," she asserted, with great asperity.

"I am the best judge of that," said the man, in a confident tone; whereat the rector rubbed his hands together with noiseless glee. Truly the battle had never before been so much to his mind.

"No, you are not. A man who thinks he wants to marry a woman, is as blind to her suitability or unsuitability as a two-days'-old kitten would be. And in such a case the only thing to be done is to leave the matter to the wisdom of one's friends. Mr. Knotley, may I trouble you to ring the bell? Ring it twice, please, because I wish Mrs. Desart to come here." And Mrs. Wynter settled herself the more firmly on her chair, in readiness for the impending fray.

"But——" expostulated the rector, pausing with his hand upon the bell.

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"I am quite ready, if you will be so good as to ring; twice, if you please," she rejoined, grimly.

The rector looked at Mark Lester, but that gentleman's face was passive and inscrutable; plainly, no remonstrance would be forthcoming from that quarter; and, considerably nonplussed, the rector rang the bell—twice, as he had been desired.

At the same moment Mark Lester rose and changed his seat, choosing the same chair behind the screen that he had been sitting in on that day in April when Alice Desart had burst into the room with her incoherent story of the cycle tragedy.

Mrs. Wynter paid no heed to the difference, did not notice it, probably, so busy was she in the preparation of those vials of wrath which were to be hurled at the head of her offending companion.

A short waiting, during which no one ventured a remark of any kind whatsoever. Then the door opened noiselessly, and Mrs. Desart entered the room.

"You wanted me, Mrs. Wynter?" she asked, with an enquiring glance at the rector, who, poor man, was looking the picture of confusion, and, truth to tell, wishing himself anywhere rather than in the drawing-room of the Limes at that identical moment.

"Yes, I wanted you; shut the door, and sit down," commanded the lady of the house, in a tone that might not be gainsaid.

Mrs. Desart obeyed, taking a chair near to the door, and wondering mightily what was coming, though it is safe to say that her guesses were a very long way from the actual truth.

"How dared you encourage Mark Lester?" burst out the old lady, almost incoherent with wrath.

"Mrs. Wynter?" ejaculated Mrs. Desart, in blank amazement, half disposed to think her ears had played her false.

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"How dared you do it, I say?" she demanded, her anger growing still.

"I have not encouraged Mr. Lester," spoke the criminal, in a decisive tone.

"But he has asked you to marry him," insisted the self-constituted judge.

"That may be," was the answer, given coolly enough, though the rector, who was watching, saw that her hands were trembling violently, and her face was very pale.

"That may not be. And I insist on your refusing him, and at once," stormed Mrs. Wynter, who was in a very great passion indeed.

But Mrs. Desart was calm—ominously so, the rector thought, as he noted the light in her eyes.

"Why should I refuse him, pray?" she asked, haughtily.

"Because you are no fit match for him, and can bring him neither money nor influence," snapped the old lady.

"Mr. Lester is surely the best judge of my suitability, and he asked me to be his wife," the culprit answered, with such a thrill of joy in her tone, that the rector, hearing it, drew a long breath, and knew that Mark Lester had won.

Not so Mrs. Wynter, who, for all her shrewdness, never could discover when she was losing ground.

"No, indeed, he is the worst possible judge, being, of course, prejudiced by his own feeling. Therefore, as his friend, and yours, too, I insist upon your refusing him."

"I shall not refuse him," Alice Desart retorted, rising to her feet, and standing like a wild animal at bay.

The rector rose, too, feeling that he really could keep silence no longer, and mentally styling Mrs. Wynter the most odious old woman of his acquaintance. "My dear——" he began, but Mrs. Desart faced round upon him abruptly, not understanding that he stood ready to champion her cause, but deeming him in league with the irate lady of the house.

"What, you too, Mr. Knotley; is all the world against

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me, then?" she asked, her tone sharp with all the pain that lay behind.

This was Mark Lester's opportunity, and he seized it ruthlessly. Rising with a quick movement, he came to the side of the astonished Mrs. Desart, saying, as he took her hand with an air of proprietorship, "No, indeed, the world is not all against you, nor would it matter if it were, seeing that we shall be together, side by side, whilst life lasts."

"Did you—did you hear what I said?" she asked, recoiling a step, and growing rosy red with confusion.

"Of course," he replied, in a cheerful, most matter-of-fact tone, as if that sort of thing was happening two or three times a week, and no question of strained emotions was involved. Then he turned to Mrs. Wynter, who by this time was practically speechless with rage.

"I am really very much obliged to you, Mrs. Wynter, for you have done me a great service to-night. This lady declined to give me a satisfactory answer, but you have been more successful. And you may as well leave off being angry, and congratulate us, for you perceive plainly that matters have gone too far for your interference to be of any avail in separating us!"

"I will congratulate you with all my heart, though Mrs. Desart did labour under the mistaken impression that I was to be classed with the rest of the world," exclaimed the rector, in a genial tone, advancing upon them with outstretched hand and beaming smile.

But Alice Desart barely touched the proffered hand, and a moment later slipped out of the room in a fit of shyness quite incomprehensible in a woman who had already been once married. Once outside the door, she fled upstairs to the sanctuary of her chamber, resolved that Mrs. Wynter might pull the bell until the wire broke, before she would emerge from thence until the two gentlemen had departed.

They did not remain long, only lingering a few moments endeavouring to soothe the irate lady, who was destined to

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lose yet another companion by the same way the previous ones had gone—that is, by the nearest cut to the altar of Hymen.

But she did not respond to their overtures very graciously, and they left her to herself at length. Only, as he took her hand in farewell, Mark Lester said sternly, "We have been friends almost as far back as I can remember, Mrs. Wynter, but I will never enter your house or touch your hand again, if I find that you visit upon that innocent woman yonder the offence for which I am solely to blame!"

"She at least was a consenting party," retorted the incensed old lady.

"Ah, well, it takes two to make a bargain, you know, but the suggestion came from me; therefore I am the culprit, as you will please to remember," he said, with a laugh of triumph, as he looked down at the rueful face of the discomfited lady.

"I shall do as I please in my own house, Mr. Mark Lester," she replied, yet with visible softening in her tone. "And I will take good care that my next companion is not of a marrying sort, for I have no fancy for acting as a matrimonial bureau for the convenience of all the widowers and bachelors of my acquaintance."

"That is not at all the right way in which to view the matter, Mrs. Wynter!" put in the rector, with a quiver of fun in his voice. "You should boast of former successes, and quote your record-breaking triumphs in the past, and you would be overwhelmed with candidates for the honour of dwelling under your roof."

"I daresay I should," rejoined the old lady, in a caustic tone; "for human nature—especially female human nature—is foolish enough for anything, but I prefer common-sense."

"It is uncommonly hard to find, though, and if I should happen on an embodiment of the virtue, I will at once bespeak it on your behalf. I owe you something for giving you the trouble of finding some other lady to fill Alice's

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place," Mark Lester said, as he took his leave, and passed out of the house with the rector.

Mrs. Desart heard them go, as she cowered trembling in her chamber above. She crept to the window then, to watch them in the bright moonlight as they turned into the avenue, and so disappeared from view.

"O God, make me worthy!" she pleaded, her lips moving in voiceless prayer, as she gazed out after the retreating figure of the man she loved. Yet, little did she reck of the fiery discipline that was coming to her out of the strength and magnitude of that same love.

It was as well. And for that night, at least, she had peace. For the anger and lamentations of Mrs. Wynter affected her no more than the fret of the surf on a pebbly shore.

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CHAPTER VII.

WHOM GOD HATH JOINED.

MARK Lester was in the habit of carrying all before him, and in the matter of his marriage, he did not depart from his usual mode of procedure.

It was quite in vain that Alice pleaded and protested against this haste in getting wed. The man's resistless will and passion broke down all her poor little objections, and triumphed over every obstacle she endeavoured to put in his way.

Besides, she had yielded once for all—as he laughingly told her—in the matter of consenting at all, and, after that, it was quite immaterial whether the knot was tied at once, or the ceremony of getting married delayed indefinitely.

And in her secret heart, perhaps, she sided with him, feeling that her hitherto defrauded life had a chance to blossom at last; and willing to accept the offered happiness without further protest, she gave way, after but a half-hearted resistance, and consented to let him have his will.

They were married at Stillwater church in the early days of October. It was Mark Lester's pleasure that the marriage should take place there, although Alice had expressed a desire for the ceremony to be performed at Clorpe, being anxious now to merge her identity in that of her husband, even to the yielding up of her own particular religious beliefs and opinions.

Autumn was slow in coming that year. September had been phenomenally hot—high summer, in fact—and those early days of October were a fainter reflex of the same.

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Mrs. Wynter, having been as angry as she pleased, had since taken on a more amiable frame of mind, and to Mrs. Desart's great amazement, joined forces with Mark Lester in hurrying on the marriage. She even went so far as to present her offending companion with a cheque for ten pounds, as a help towards the expenses of the trousseau, and would, further, have laid the bride under obligation by giving a crowded and brilliant wedding reception, but for the emphatic protests of those chiefly concerned.

She insisted, too, on giving the bride away, and on the morning of the marriage, put off her widow's weeds for the first time in twenty years, and clothed herself in purple velvet and nodding plumes, her poor yellow face—for the effects of that attack of jaundice clung to her still—looking strangely pathetic under the burden of finery piled above it. Miss Keziah Dawe made open fun of her, declaring that fine feathers did occasionally fail to make fine birds, despite the proverbial assertion to the contrary. But Alice Desart clung closer to the side of the erect figure in the sweeping velvet gown, feeling that the caustic-tongued old lady had been a very real friend after all.

They were rather late in arriving at church, Mrs. Wynter's toilet having demanded the whole attention of the household staff, so that the poor bride had but scanty time for her own preparations.

Mark Lester came down the church path to meet them, and then, in defiance of custom, walked back to the porch by the side of his wife that was soon to be.

Together they passed the grave with the glaring white tombstone, and Alice, stealing a half-fearful glance at it as she passed, was rallied by him for her cowardice.

"What, do you fear the dead man still? Why, Alice, you are worse than Daisy, for she only shivers in terror of ghosts by night, whilst you are trembling in broad daylight!" he said, with a laugh; and then Mrs. Wynter sharply bade him be silent, declaring that his dissenting

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irreverence was intolerable in a church; although as they were only on the doorstep of the porch, it was not easy to see where the irreverence came in.

The whole of Mark Lester's children were present to see their father married—Raymond, red and uncomfortable, in a frock coat and tight gloves; Ethel, slim and pretty, tilting her nose disdainfully, not in scorn of her father and the woman he was marrying, but simply and solely to show her contempt of her aunt's sharp watchfulness of herself and the others.

Miss Keziah Dawe was as rigidly uncomfortable as she deemed it her duty to be when present at a service of the Established Church, and endeavoured, as much as possible, to convey the impression that she was there only under protest.

The two boys, Donald and Theodore, were sitting with Mr. Josiah Dawe, of Bockley Bent, whose pockets they would rifle by-and-bye for the chocolates that were morally certain to be found there. But Daisy was doing penance in the front pew with Miss Keziah, a state of things so unpleasant, that she was on the verge of stormy tears, when—the service being ended—her father turned away from the altar rails, and held out his hand to her.

Then she knew that he had not forgotten his promise to her, that she should sign the register as well as the grown-up people, and promptly diving under her aunt's detaining hand, she made a rush for it, coming to grief, however, at the step by the lectern, where she tumbled into an ignominious heap, and cried out shrilly with fright and pain.

It was Alice Desart—Alice Lester now—who picked her up, and wiped the tears away, putting an arm in protecting fashion round her, when Miss Dawe would have borne her off to captivity again, and by so doing, effectually winning the small maiden's affections.

Alice signed the old name for the last time with a shivering sigh of relief. What a nightmare of horror the

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bondage of that wedlock had been to her, none but herself could know, and release from it was like being formed anew—a fresh start, with the past for ever blotted out.

"'Whom God hath joined,'" whispered her husband to her, as they passed the grave of Leon Desart, on their way to the Priors, where the wedding feast awaited them. "Alice, if God was not in the first marriage, His presence has not been withheld from this, so let us take heart, and be happy, since we are together at last."

But she was crying bitterly behind her veil, her form trembling with the violence of her hardly-repressed sobs. He hid her from observation as much as he could, but it was not possible that it could go entirely unnoticed by the onlookers, who, however, put it down to strained nerves, and thought no more about it.

Not so Mr. Josiah Dawe, the kindly step-brother of Mark Lester. He ruminated on those uncalled-for tears, until his face grew into a doleful pucker of dismay.

"What's the matter, Uncle Jo? Did you want to marry father's nice new wife?" demanded Daisy, who was enthroned on her uncle's knee, eating chocolate creams from his waistcoat pocket.

The question banished Mr. Dawe's gloom temporarily, and he laughed until he cried over the suggestion; but the shadow came back to his face after a time, and stayed there.

"Daisy, you must be very good to the new mother," he said, in a solemn tone, wagging his head slowly from side to side to emphasize his speech.

"Of course," replied that young lady, diving into the pocket in search of more chocolate, and paying but little heed to anything else.

"You mustn't make her cry, be very sure of that," he adjured, his manner more lugubrious than before. "She isn't Aunt Keziah, you know."

"I should think not," responded the young lady, with

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cheerful alacrity. "Ethel says anybody will be better than Aunt Keziah; she's really an awful old cat, and no mistake!" and she nodded her head severely.

"Daisy, Daisy, you must not say such dreadful things. Aunt Keziah has been a good, kind aunt to you, and it is your duty to speak of her with love and respect—mind, with love and respect," he repeated, slowly.

"Yes, Uncle Josiah; will you speak of her with love and respect, when she has lived with you a dreadfully long time?" asked the child, with an arch look at her uncle.

"Of course I shall. She is my sister, you know; and I have loved her ever since she was a little girl," he retorted in a shocked tone, thinking it was high time Mark Lester took another wife, if only for the sake of teaching the children to regard their seniors with a more fitting reverence and respect.

"Was Aunt Keziah ever a little girl like me, and did she wear spectacles and a cap then?" queried the child, with a delighted wriggle, and an outburst of joyous laughter, because the idea was so funny.

But Mr. Josiah Dawe was not pleased; a childless widower himself, it was not given to him to understand juvenile habits of thought, or to condone the irreverence of its expression. And instead of replying to Daisy in the same fashion, and thus convincing her without doubt that her aunt had once been as lively and as merry as herself, he put her down hastily, and in silence.

The bride and bridegroom were just making their farewells before starting for Brighton, where their honeymoon was to be spent. And Mr. Josiah Dawe made his way to the side of Alice, and, seizing upon her hand, shook it solemnly, remarking in a dolorous tone: "My dear, I wish you every happiness; but there's no need for me to tell you life isn't all roses, and you'll maybe find a few thorns here and there, to remind you that you haven't got to heaven yet."

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"I expect I shall, Mr. Dawe; but I have made a pretty extensive acquaintance with prickles of one sort and another, and so the experience will not be novel," she replied, with a bright smile.

"Josiah, if you please, not Mr. Dawe, now that you are, so to speak, my sister; and my dear, if you ever want a friend, if it's ever in my power to help you in any way, you let me know, and I'll come. Oh, I'll be sure to come!" he said, speaking out of the inspiration of his kindly heart, and little guessing how, in years to come, his words would be remembered, and he called upon to make his promise good.

For the present, however, his offer seemed very unnecessary; and the bride, secure in her husband's love, only smiled serenely as she thanked him, believing in her ignorance that all the storms of life lay behind, and from henceforth to the day of her death, the sky above her would show no more the tempest rack of despair, or the tornado of misery, that should herald a broken heart.

Mr. Josiah Dawe took the two younger boys back to Bockley Bent that evening, rightly judging that Miss Keziah would not be sorry to have so much responsibility taken off her hands. They were glad to go, too, knowing well that at their uncle's house they would be able to follow the promptings of their own sweet wills; whilst the Priors, in the absence of their father, would be not much better than a prison, or a penitentiary.

Ethel volunteered to keep Mrs. Wynter company at the Limes, until that lady could light on a companion to suit her. And the home circle was reduced to Miss Keziah, Raymond, and Daisy, until the master and his new wife should return.

So the first act of the drama was played out.

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CHAPTER VIII.

The Warning.

A YEAR passed away, and it was autumn again. Late autumn, too, for November was half way through; and the rain, it rained every day, and sometimes every night as well.

It had been a frightfully unhealthy season in Stillwater; measles, dysentery, and diphtheria, had jostled each other in the village street, claiming their victims here and there; and then, as if such visitation were not enough, an epidemic of scarlet fever set in, and raged with such violence that the whole parish was practically in quarantine.

The children at the Priors—Donald, Theodore, and Daisy—had been sent away to Bockley Bent when the fever first showed itself. Raymond was with a farmer in Lincolnshire, being made wise in matters pertaining to ensilage and cattle-rearing, his father rightly deeming his agricultural apprenticeship incomplete, until such time as he had seen something of farming in counties outside Fordshire, which was conservative on more counts than politics.

Ethel was with Mrs. Wynter still, that lady and she agreeing uncommonly well, to the amazement of all who knew them. They were at Bath for November, Mrs. Wynter objecting to the uncomfortable abundance of moisture to be found in Stillwater in a damp autumn like the present, when the garden at the Limes was under water, right up to the front doorstep; and no one could be certain that it would not rise higher still, and submerge the hall and lower rooms as well.

Even the Knotleys had taken flight for a week or two,

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but their going was compulsory, owing to the sickness unto death of the rector's brother. And in the absence of its lawful pastor, the curate from Clorpe shepherded the Stillwater flock.

The establishment at the Priors was reduced to its lowest limits; one of the servants had sickened with fever, and was being nursed at the hastily improvised sanatorium in the village; the other had fled in sheer terror of a like fate. And, as charwomen were unobtainable under the present condition of affairs in the village, Mrs. Lester found herself compelled to do her own cooking and sweeping; whilst one of the farm men valorously assisted in the harder work of the kitchen, awkwardly manipulating a dish-cloth, and committing frightful devastation among the crockery.

But Mrs. Lester was thankful for even so much help, and putting away all that was most valuable in the breakable line, resigned herself to eating from chipped plates, and drinking from cracked cups, until such time as the panic in the village abated, and she could get maids once more.

There was not much to brighten the monotony of those heavy days; and she looked with some secret dismay on the wide-stretching flats of Stillwater, where acres on acres lay hidden under the steely grey of the flood-water. But Alice Lester was given to making the best of things, since life had smiled upon her in the matters of husband and home. So she sang as she went about the house at her work, and had a pleasant smile for Mark when he came in from the damp, dreary world outside.

One day—and it had rained harder than ever since the dawning—Mark started to attend a missionary meeting at Clorpe, going early in the afternoon, in order to be present at the tea-meeting, and to assist in counting the contents of the missionary-boxes, which were always called in at this time.

Not liking to leave his wife entirely alone in the house

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for the long evening, he rode round by the village, and begged Mrs. Lot Godfrey to go and keep her company, which the old lady was very glad to do, thankful for any opportunity that offered of paying back to the Lesters some portion of the debt of kindness she owed them.

The rain ceased for an hour in the afternoon, and the old lady tramped up to the Priors on her high-ringed pattens, with her umbrella under her arm. She might have been driven the distance but for the peculiar horror she had of trusting herself in anything upon wheels, preferring, as she would waggishly observe, the safer locomotion of Shank's ponies.

She had scarcely got inside the house before the rain came down again, harder than before, and the two women, with the long, solitary evening before them, sat down to their tea in the warm, well-lighted dining-room.

"I wish Mr. Lester was at home; hark to the rain," said Alice, as she passed Mrs. Lot Godfrey a second cup of tea.

"Yes, yes," sighed the old woman, plaintively, "and the Clorpe road is very bad for travelling when the floods are out."

"It is bad at any time in the darkness; the ditches are so deep, and the road winds so much," Alice retorted, with a sigh, and then she was very silent until the meal was done.

Mrs. Lot Godfrey cleared the table, and washed the cups and saucers, declaring herself incapable of sitting still whilst the lady of the house did the work of a servant.

"I feel so worried," said Alice, later on in the evening. She had been to the top of the house, looking out over the dark watery wastes towards Clorpe, coming back to the dining-room to find Mrs. Lot Godfrey placidly knitting by the fire.

"I wouldn't be anxious," said the old lady; "at the worst, Mr. Lester will only get wet through."

"But some accident might happen with all that water out; he might even be——" but she stopped suddenly, covering her face with her hands, and shuddering violently.

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"He wouldn't be killed, that's certain, for we've had no warning," rejoined the old lady, calmly, pausing in her knitting to count the stitches, and then going on with her work again in a leisurely, comfortable fashion.

"What do you mean by a warning?" asked Mrs. Lester, sitting down in Mark's big easy chair by the fire, and picking up a screen to shield her face from the fierceness of the heat.

"Hasn't Mr. Lester told you yet?" cried Mrs. Lot Godfrey, letting her work drop unheeded to the floor, whilst she peered keenly at the lady sitting opposite to her.

"I suppose not, seeing I haven't the least idea what you mean. Perhaps it is a secret," Alice replied, with a nervous laugh, and interposing the screen now to shield her from the close scrutiny of her companion.

"I'll tell you myself, then, for one never knows what is going to happen, and knowledge or ignorance might spell the difference between life and death when the warning did come," the woman said, carefully lowering her voice, and leaning forward that the other might hear.

"But stay, would Mr. Lester prefer that I should not know? He has never told me, remember," cried Alice, drawing back with a shivering protest against the communication that was about to be made.

"Likely as not, no. But seeing as it may be the means of saving his life some day, or the lives of his children, and of yours when it is born, it is as well you should know. Whenever a Lester is in danger of death, there's always a warning given to some of his kin who bear his name, and, in two cases out of every three, there is time to avert the calamity if you are only awake to the fact that it is a warning."

"But what is it? How does it come? And how did you get to know about it?" panted Alice, pouring forth her questions with almost incoherent haste.

"It comes different every time. Sometimes it's one

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thing, sometimes another. When old Mr. Lester died twenty-five years ago this month, I nursed him; then it was a black dog, that came from no one knew where, and howled round the house at night, though no one ever saw it in the daylight. For three nights it came, and on the fourth night the poor gentleman died, and his last words were about a black dog that would not howl again, though how he knew it was black is more than I can say, since no one had mentioned it to him, and, indeed, he had lain unconscious the whole time. But he was a hard man to the poor, was old Mr. Lester, for all that he loved his Bible so much; and it was my opinion that the black dog wasn't of this world at all, but the spirit of some poor lost creature, whom his hardness had sent to an unquiet end, come back to haunt him on his upward flight."

"Oh, Mrs. Godfrey, how can you say such things, or believe them, either? Don't you know that there are no such things as ghosts or disembodied spirits in this world? How can you, a christian, be so superstitious?" exclaimed Mrs. Lester, in a shocked tone, yet with a creeping dread all over her, lest in some way it might be true.

"It is because I am a christian that I believe in it at all," rejoined the other, doggedly. "Doesn't our Lord Himself say, 'The poor ye have always with you, but Me ye have not always,' and what can that mean but what I have said?"

"No, no, I am sure it can't mean that, not all that!" cried Alice, growing pale.

Mrs. Lot Godfrey shook her head. It was perfectly incomprehensible to her that others could be so hard of belief concerning a truth so manifest to herself. "It stands to reason that when a man or woman sins against their kind, punishment will come in somewhere," she said, picking up her work, and peering intently at it to see that no stitches had slipped from the needles; "I'm not doubting but what old Mr. Lester got to heaven in the end, but

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I'd be mighty surprised to hear that he got there without some sort of tribulation by the way."

This was beyond the theological depth of the listener, who was more anxious to be satisfied concerning the fashion the warning might take than its probable mission when it did appear. "Does it always take the shape of a dog?" she asked, stooping to put more coals on the fire, then restlessly crossing the room to look out of the window.

"Oh, no," replied Mrs. Lot Godfrey, "it never appears twice in the same shape. When Mr. Mark's mother died, it was a white pigeon, that flew into the house every time the windows were open; and when Miss Lottie Lester was killed in the railway disaster at Mitchingham, the great picture on the stairs fell down and smashed, just as she was going out of the house to start on the fatal journey. If I had been here, she should not have gone, poor dear, in the face of such a warning; but Mr. Mark was away, and you know yourself, ma'am, how little heed Miss Dawe would be likely to pay to a thing of that kind. Besides, her lover was to meet her at Mitchingham, and he did, but she was dead then."

"Oh, how dreadful! I have not heard of that; was she my husband's sister?" asked Mrs. Lester, coming back from the window, with a scared look on her face.

"Yes, the youngest; such a bright, winsome young lady. Mr. Mark was dreadfully cut up at her death, and reproached Miss Keziah for not heeding the warning, and keeping her at home. There was coldness between them for years because of it; and, even now, he cannot speak of the death, because of the pain it brings to him."

Mrs. Lester sat silently gazing into the fire. She would like to have questioned Mrs. Lot Godfrey further concerning the coldness that had fallen between her husband and his step-sister. Was he unforgiving? she wondered, as she watched the leaping, dancing flames in the wide grate. It

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must have been his fault, seeing that Miss Keziah was the offender. And that her husband should cherish resentment for years, was a revelation of his character that came to her with all the force of a blow.

The hours passed slowly away. At nine o'clock, the man in charge of the stables, who had been feeding the horses, brought in the keys, informing his mistress that he had left the food ready for Mr. Lester's horse when he should reach home.

"Aren't you going to wait for him, Oliver?" asked Alice, in surprise, for she had been keeping the fire up in the outer kitchen for him to sit by.

"No, ma'am. The master kindly said he'd take the saddle off the mare himself, as he should be late, so as I could get a good night's rest, for it's my turn to go to bed to-night, and it do be dreadful hard lines to work all day and watch all night."

"I am sure it must be, Oliver," she answered, sympathetically; and then went off to the larder to bring him a basket of dainties for the sick children, that she had packed earlier in the day.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am. I don't know how we'd manage at all but for you and the master. Little Jim is main bad to-night, and doctor don't give no hopes of he," the man said, with a quaver of emotion in his rough voice. He had eight children lying ill, and, to his troubled eyes, the cloud above him had no silver lining then.

"Little Jim—that is the fair-haired one. Does he suffer much?" she asked, gently, her eyes filling with tears for the sorrow of the man before her.

"No, ma'am, no; he wanders a deal in his head, and is always calling us to look at the beautiful angels all round his bed, and saying that he wants to go with them," and Oliver rubbed his fist across his eyes, stamping and coughing to hide his emotion.

Mrs. Lester said all the comforting things she could think

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of to him, and when he had gone, stood looking out into the wet darkness that had swallowed him up.

When she came into the house again, preparations for supper held her busy for a time, for Mark would need something hot and comforting after his wet, cold ride. He might be looked for very soon now, she thought, and, piling yet more wood on the fire in the dining-room, sat down again to wait with what patience she might.

Mrs. Lot Godfrey had dropped to sleep in her chair, and was snoring placidly. How could she do it? Alice wondered, gazing half-scornfully at the withered, bent figure in the opposite chair. But then, it was not the old woman's husband who had to battle home through the wind and the rain; hence the fact of her slumbering was not so amazing, after all.

The dining-room at the Priors had two windows; one, a modern bay, that was almost close to the front door, the other, an ancient casement with stone mullions, that looked out on the moat.

Mrs. Lester had risen again in her restlessness, and was crossing the room to the bay window, intending to pull the curtains aside, and look out, when suddenly a rough grasp seized the door-knocker, and banged it violently, shaking the heavy oaken door as if some weighty body had been flung against it. The unexpectedness of the sound caused her to utter a cry of fear, for she had heard no noise of approaching footsteps, although the gravelled path from the moat bridge led past the bay window, close to which she was standing, and in the stillness of the night, the rush of the water at Deep Dykes, threequarters of a mile away, was plainly audible.

"Mrs. Godfrey!" she cried, "Mrs. Godfrey! What was that noise? Did you hear it?"

Mrs. Lot Godfrey started, shivered, and awoke. "What did you say, my dear? Has Mr. Lester come home?"

"No, no; but hush! There it is again!" Alice cried;

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but this time it was not so much a knock as a struggle to get the door open, it being violently shaken and pushed, and the handle rattled vigorously.

"Shall I ask who is there?" whispered Alice, who looked dreadfully frightened.

"No; let's go upstairs, and look out of one of the windows. Perhaps we'll be able to see who it is," said the old woman, and they crept upstairs in the dark, holding each others' hands, in a desperate attempt to be as brave as the occasion demanded.

But ere they could reach a window, the summons at the hall door was repeated even more urgently, echoing terribly through the silent night.

They clung to each other in an agony of fear. Then, after a minute, Alice, who was no coward at heart, disengaged herself, saying hurriedly, "I'll open the window in Ethel's room, and look out. It may be some one come up from the village for help of some kind."

"Oh, my dear, don't risk your precious life; they may shoot you!" urged the old woman, in a panic, seeking to hold her back from the danger of the unseen.

"Nonsense! They can't see me in this dense darkness," she answered, gently unfastening the casement, and pushing it slightly open, while she demanded, in a loud and courageous tone, who was there.

To the surprise of them both, no answer came, and when —growing bolder—Alice opened the casement wider, and poked her head as far out of the window as she could safely get it, she could see no one, though the white door-stone was dimly discernible, like a faint grey patch, in the blackness of the night.

"Perhaps they've gone round to the back door," suggested Mrs. Lot Godfrey, whose few remaining teeth were chattering audibly.

But, as if in contradiction of this statement, there immediately commenced another onslaught on the door

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below, and now, as at the first, the big knocker was violently banged.

"Mrs. Godfrey," cried Alice, her voice almost a scream, as the horrible idea occurred to her, "is it the warning, do you think?"

"Yes, yes, it must be; but courage, my dear, perhaps there's time to save him yet, if only we knew what to do. Let me think a minute."

The window was still open, and the chill of the outside damp struck coldly on them as they stood all unmindful of it, and the roar and the rush of the distant water seemed to grow louder every moment.

"I can't bear it any longer. I shall go and meet him, even though I walk all the way to Clorpe," said Alice, with a sob, forgetting her fear—forgetting everything—in the thought of her husband's probable danger.

"Shall I come with you, dear?" asked the old woman, whose voice shook with terror and emotion.

"No, no; you must stay here to keep the fires burning, and to have hot water ready. And, oh, Mrs. Godfrey, pray for me, that I may be in time," she wailed, as she began hurriedly to make preparations for her start.

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CHAPTER IX.

How the Danger was Averted.

"MY dear, you must wrap up well," urged Mrs. Lot Godfrey, as Alice sat on the top step of the stairs, rapidly buttoning on a pair of high, thick boots.

"Yes, yes; I shall put on Mark's big, white mackintosh over my thick jacket; will you go down and light the lantern for me, please? I left it on the kitchen table," she panted, wrestling with desperate haste at the buttons on her boots.

The old woman hurried downstairs and along the hall to the kitchen, fear giving an impetus to her feet, as another insistent knock sounded upon the big door as she passed.

Mrs. Lester herself was down by the time the lantern was lighted, looking a sufficiently weird figure in the long white mackintosh, with a close cap pressed firmly down upon her hair.

"No, not that way, Mrs. Godfrey, I can't face it; I'll go out by the back door, please," she panted, arming herself with the biggest and thickest stick in the umbrella-stand, and taking the lantern in her hand, whilst Mrs. Lot Godfrey moved to unfasten the door for her.

The old woman gave a sigh of relief, as she turned towards the back door, being as little disposed as Mrs. Lester to encounter the ghostly hand that had given the warning. "I wish you had something to go with you, my dear, if it was only a dog," she said anxiously, as she unfastened the bolts and bars of the back door.

"So do I; but old Rover has gone with his master, the puppies are with the children at Bockley Bent, and the

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sheep dogs are both at the shepherd's house," Alice replied, as she stepped over the threshold into the wet darkness of the night.

Then she turned back to Mrs. Lot Godfrey, crying out in a tone of yearning pain: "Pray for me, that I may be in time; oh, pray for me, whilst I am gone!"

"Of course I'll be praying, my dear, and you'll be praying yourself, too; sure, the fervent petitions of the two of us, must bring a favourable answer down."

"I can't pray when trouble comes," she answered drearily, and was turning away, when the old woman called after her.

"You'll be careful when you get to Deep Dykes, Mrs. Lester; they say in the village that the water comes over the bridge, and so you'll have to climb along the fence rails, maybe."

"Very well, I will remember," she called back in answer; and then the door was shut, was barred and bolted, and she was alone in the night.

Aye, doubly alone, since when trouble came she could not pray!

The lantern in one hand, the stick in the other, she went her way over the moat-bridge, and down the lane past the churchyard, towards Deep Dykes. The wind had dropped, but the rain still fell with a dreary persistency, though she hardly felt it, being absorbed with the terror of disaster to her husband, that she was blindly hastening to avert.

Once out of the lane, and on the high road, she stepped out briskly enough. In places even this road was under water; and, despite the thickness of her boots, they were soaked through before she reached Deep Dykes.

As she approached this place, swollen now from a small but deep brook to a fair-sized river, she knew that a very difficult task lay before her, for the water had risen until the bridge was submerged; and, to get over, she must

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climb the fence and crawl along the rails, or wade ankle-deep through the flood.

How it roared, and hissed, as it swirled along in the darkness! And finding the water already nearly to the tops of her boots, she stopped, holding the lantern up and peering anxiously into the blackness, to see if haply she might discover the friendly fence along which she must creep to gain the opposite bank and continue her journey.

But no fence was there. Nothing to be seen but the brown, eddying water, hurrying to tumble over a little cascade further on, where the stream had been dammed to make a pool for washing sheep.

For a moment she gazed in uncomprehending bewilderment. Then the truth flashed upon her—the bridge was gone, washed away by the pressure of the flood water.

In her impotent distress, she could have wrung her hands and cried aloud, for between her and the road she had to travel, surged the river—a black, unfordable stream.

She could not go forward, that was evident. And it was equally impossible to go back, for Mark might come at any moment; and, plunging into the water, ignorant of the fact that the bridge had been swept away, be drowned, almost within sight of home.

There was a little strip of roadway higher—and consequently drier—than the rest of the ground just around that place; and here she stationed herself, walking backwards and forwards like a sentinel, no fear of the dark loneliness of the night oppressing her now, but wholly absorbed by her terrible dread of danger and death to her husband.

It seemed to her that the minutes were as long as hours, as she tramped to and fro in her sodden boots, her skirts heavy with the wet that had soaked into them below the edge of the white mackintosh, her cap and hair also dripping with the rain that was falling still, though not so heavily as when she left the Priors.

Presently, above the rushing of the water, she heard the

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hoof-beats of a horse. Was it fancy? For a moment she feared her strained senses were deceiving her, but no; on it came, nearer and nearer, and with an articulate cry of joy, she waved the lantern high above her head, and sent forth a shout to warn the advancing traveller.

"Mark! Mark! is it you, Mark?" she cried, sending her voice out lustily now, for those hoof-beats sounded as sweetest music in her longing ears.

At the noise of her shouting the horse was stopped, and an answering shout came out of the darkness, "Who calls?"

Ah, it was her husband's voice, and he was alive, and well. The warning had meant this danger of the flood, then, and she would be able to save him from it, after all. But this passed through her mind like a flash, as she was calling back: "It is I, your wife, Alice Lester."

At this, the horse was again urged forward, until it seemed to her straining eyes that she could descry the shadowy outlines of man and beast upon the opposite shore.

"Stop, Mark, stop!" she cried, in a panic now, lest he should come too far. "The bridge is washed away, and you can't get across."

"Alice, what are you doing out here at this time of night?" he called back, in unbelieving astonishment, half inclined to think it must be her spirit, and not his wife in the flesh, who was waving that warning light on the other side of the stream.

"I am waiting for you. You will have to go back to Clorpe, and come home through Ducklington; that bridge will be safe."

Her voice was brave and courageous, but her heart felt dreadfully heavy, and her imbs were weary beyond description.

"Clorpe and Ducklington, seven good miles; it is nearly midnight, and I have had no supper. Is nothing else possible?" he called back.

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"I don't know," she answered faintly, for the gloom and loneliness oppressed her terribly, and her strength was beginning to give out, too.

"Alice, you are afraid! I'll make the effort, dear, to get over to you. At the worst, the mare and I can swim."

"No, no!" she shrieked. "The warning came to-night, and you'll be drowned if you attempt it."

"It must be Clorpe and Ducklington, then, and seven miles before we rest. But Alice, can you go back alone?"

"Yes, but dare I go? Will anyone else pass this way, do you think?"

Mark pondered a minute; then he called back: "The doctor was at Clorpe this evening, and going to see a woman who is ill at Wearwash; from there he was coming to Stillwater; if he has been detained, he may be on the road now, and I shall miss him if he takes the short cut past Roden's barn. Dare you stay there, Alice, until I can rouse the village, and send a man down to mount guard until daylight?"

"Yes, Mark, I dare," she called back, trying with all her might to let her voice ring out courageously, though it quivered in spite of her. And then, setting spurs into his horse's sides, Mark Lester galloped away by the road he had come.

Silence again, and darkness. But the rain was ceasing, and the night had hope in it now, since she had saved her husband from the danger of the broken bridge. And as the brooding cloud of fear had lifted, Alice felt herself able to pray again, though her utterances were not so much petitions, as incoherent thanksgivings for mercies received. That something was wrong with her spiritual condition could scarcely be doubted, since when trouble menaced, her soul was dumb towards God.

She ceased to walk to and fro after Mark rode away; her feet were too weary, and it was all she could do to keep from sinking to the wet earth, and lying there. It was

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cold, too, with a clinging chill, that seemed to pierce to her bones. If only she might have sat down for a few moments; but no, if once she sat down, she would not have strength to rise again, or to warn the doctor of the broken bridge, if he came that way.

Strange visions began to torture her, too, and she could not tell whether they were fact or fancy. The pale ghost of her Aunt Caroline came stealing up out of the darkness, wringing its shadowy hands in unavailing reproach; then it was Leon's ghastly, battered face that leered at her from the surging, swirling waters of the swollen brook. Always dying, never dead, he was continually bobbing up and down in the muddy brown water at her feet. Unable to bear the torture longer, she screamed aloud at length, her voice echoing shrilly through the damp darkness of that dreadful night. The sound of it banished the ghosts, however, and recalled her scattering senses in a momentary rally.

Would Mark never come to release her from her dreary vigil? Oh, how soft and warm her bed was, but how far off! And then, by a sudden change of fancy, she thought it was close at hand, only just beyond her reach.

The noise of the rushing waters grew further away; was she becoming deaf? She lifted a cold, wet hand to touch her ear, and lo, the sound was perfectly audible once more. The lantern her tired fingers still grasped, changed to brilliant sunshine as she gazed; but the brightness had no warmth in it, being damp and chill, like the world around her.

Suddenly a shout—a reassuring shout—sounded through the night. It could not be Mark yet, she decided; then it must be the doctor, who, from the Clorpe road, had seen her light, and was hailing it.

"Stop! stop! stop for your life, the bridge is swept away!" she cried; but her voice had no sound for her own ears even, and in her agony of despair at her impotence to stay the traveller, whom she supposed to be riding to his

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ruin, she shrieked and shrieked, finding voice at last, and waving the lantern wildly to and fro.

But the voices came on, and cheery shouts rang out, not from the Clorpe road, but out behind her—from where was rest, and warmth, and home. Surely, surely, that was her husband's voice, and there was a sound of wheels, too. He had roused the village, then, and they were going to drive her home!

She was sobbing like a baby when they found her, and Mark Lester's voice had an odd, choked sound in it as he lifted her into the low carriage, calling her his "brave, faithful wife."

After that she knew no more, until she roused to find herself in her own room at the Priors, with her husband, the doctor, and Mrs. Lot Godfrey, all hovering round her bed.

At first she thought it was all a freak of her imagination, and that she was still out in the dark and silent night, for the chill of her long exposure was on her yet. Then Mark bent lower, and kissed her, asking if she felt better, and so she supposed it must be reality, and no dream.

"You are safe?" she murmured, looking at him with dim eyes, whilst her body ached in every limb.

"Yes, yes; and so am I, thanks to you, Mrs. Lester," said the doctor, answering for Mark, whose words did not come readily yet. "I was on my way to Deep Dykes, when I met your husband coming back, and so we did the journey round through Ducklington together."

"I am very glad," she answered, feebly, wondering why Mrs. Lot Godfrey was crying so copiously. There was nothing to cry for now, surely, when all the darkness was past, and nothing remained but the remembrance of it, and her own weary pain of aching limbs.

She heard the doctor telling her husband that she must be kept perfectly quiet, heard him scolding the poor old woman for her tears—and then consciousness slipped away from her again.

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CHAPTER X.

Her Life for His.

THE strain and agony of that night's vigil brought on a severe fit of illness for Mrs. Lester, and, growing rapidly worse, she lay at length at the point of death.

Miss Keziah Dawe came in haste from her brother's house at Bockley Bent to nurse the invalid, but was promptly elbowed out of the sick-room by Mrs. Lot Godfrey, who declared that, though she might be very useful in the kitchen, she would be no manner of good in the chamber above, where Mark Lester's wife lay in her sore sickness.

At first, Miss Keziah was disposed to resent this summary handling, but a moment's reflection showed her that this was no time for haggling over minor points of precedence, and betaking herself downstairs, proceeded vigorously to the reduction of the confusion reigning there.

Mrs. Lot Godfrey had her own reasons for sending Miss Keziah out of the sick-room, and, given a free hand in the matter, she would have banished Mark likewise, and only permitted the entrance of the doctor at such times as her patient lay in the quiet of exhaustion. For Alice, in her delirium, was always seeing her first husband, Leon Desart, hovering round her bed, menacing her with dark, evil eyes, that peered at her from the gloomy corners of the room at night.

Not for worlds would the old woman have had Miss Keziah present to hear this pitiful babble, knowing as she did how prejudiced that lady was, and guessing intuitively, also, that the marriage had not been quite to her mind.

Mark was, at the first, perfectly astounded at this turn of

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his wife's delirium. Then he, like Mrs. Lot Godfrey, grew uneasy in consequence of it, making feeble efforts to excuse it to the faithful old soul who hovered so unweariedly over the sick-bed, sleeping when the sufferer slept, waking at a sound or a touch, taking her food when she could get it, and comporting herself generally in a manner that would have entirely scandalized a modern nurse, who, having been taught to look upon nursing as a science, is careful to take it in a systematic fashion, the twenty-four hours being mapped out for herself and her patient with mathematical precision.

"Why did you put that tombstone over his grave?" demanded the poor delirious sufferer, turning appealing eyes to her husband, whom she always seemed to recognize when he approached her.

Mark looked at Mrs. Lot Godfrey to help him out with a reply, and the old woman promptly came to his assistance. "It will keep the bad man down, my dear; oh, yes, he'll never get out of his grave to hurt my pretty one, while that big stone is on top of him."

"But he isn't there!" she shrieked, beating the air with impotent hands, until her husband took them into his strong grasp, and soothed her so.

"Sick people do have the most untoward fancies," murmured Mark, when Alice had fallen into an unquiet slumber; he stole a sidelong glance at Mrs. Lot Godfrey as he spoke, to judge what impression the ravings might have had upon her.

But the old woman's attention seemed to be entirely taken up in warming some beef-tea for her patient, and it was a moment before she spoke.

"Yes, sir, 'tis mostly so; and the more untoward the fancy, the closer they cling to it, in most cases. It must add to her suffering, though, to be believing it is true, and, poor dear, she has enough to bear of bodily pain without anything else."

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"When I see her like this, I feel it in me to wish that you had never let her come that night. At the worst, I could only have died," Mark Lester said, gloomily, as he stood gazing down at the worn, troubled face on the pillow.

"Oh, sir, you mustn't be saying a thing like that. Her coming saved your life, that is certain, and if she dies from the exposure and the hardship of it, and so gives her life for yours, don't you think she'll be more blessed in the giving than if it had not cost so much?"

"But if she dies, how can she be blessed in the giving?" persisted Mark, his heart feeling an added pang as he noted how thin the hand had grown that lay on the coverlet.

The old woman turned to him with reproach in her tone. "You won't surely be needing for me to tell you aught of the world that is to come, Mr. Lester, or the degrees of blessedness to be found there; you must know a deal more concerning it than an ignorant old woman like myself can do."

"I am not so sure of that. Mere book-learning goes but a little way in fathoming the mysteries of that other world; the wisdom gained from faith and prayer is far more potent there," he replied.

At this moment the door was pushed open a little way, and Miss Keziah put her head in at the aperture thus made.

"Mark, can you come? Ethel is downstairs," she said, in a loud, hissing whisper, that would have served to rouse a whole hospital of patients, and which startled Alice into sudden wakefulness.

But she was conscious now, and with no memory even of the torment she had been enduring only such a short time previously.

"Ethel, did you say?" she asked, in a weak tone. "Has she come to stay; may I see her?"

But Mrs. Lot Godfrey, with a peremptory sweep of her vigorous old arms, had hustled not only Miss Keziah, but Mr. Lester also, from the room, and, shutting the door on

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the pair of them, came back to the bedside to administer the beef-tea before making any promises regarding visitors for her patient.

"I am tired; I have had bad dreams," Mrs. Lester said, in a sharp, worried tone, looking up into the kindly old face bending over her.

"Yes, dear, but they'll pass off as you grow stronger. Go to sleep now, and when you've rested you shall see Miss Ethel."

She smiled then, a wan, flickering gleam that hardly served to illuminate her face, but there was more of rest in it; and then, without another word, she closed her eyes, and dropped into slumber again.

Downstairs, Ethel Lester was greeting her father, and, as usual, turning her back upon her Aunt Keziah.

"You should not have run such a risk, Ethel," he said, reprovingly, but his arms were round her, and he was kissing her fondly as he spoke, for his children were very dear to him, whilst they, in their turn, regarded him with feelings near akin to adoration.

"There is no infection in the house, is there?" she asked.

"No, but there is plenty in the village," put in Miss Keziah, in a rasping tone.

"It is half-a-mile away. And I am not going there," retorted Miss Ethel, in a flippant manner. Then she turned to her father again.

"I can't stay long, daddy; only until to-morrow morning, for Mrs. Wynter is not very well, but I had to come. I was afraid lest—lest——" but the words faltered on her tongue at sight of the sudden greyness overspreading her father's face.

"Lest she should die?" he asked, understanding the hesitation. "We are all afraid of it, Ethel, for she is very, very ill."

"Poor mother!" whispered the girl, her bright eyes becoming dim with tears; it was the first time she had

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called the second Mrs. Lester, mother; and her father heard the new name with peculiar pleasure.

"Why did you not let us know that you were coming? Then some one could have met you at the station," he said, thinking how absence from home had improved her.

"Because you would have forbidden my coming," she retorted, with a laugh; then asked, with a sudden change of tone, "Have you sent for Raymond, father?"

"No, I should hardly do that. It is not as if Mrs. Lester was really his mother, not even as if she had longer been my wife," he replied, with some wonder at the earnestness of her tone.

"But Raymond was always so much attached to her. And, father, don't you think even if we had hated her before—which we did not—that we should love her now, for having watched by that broken bridge to keep you from the danger of drowning?"

Aye, that was it. The reward for unselfish service had its meed here. And if here, surely hereafter also, in an intensified and glorified fashion.

"The warning came, didn't it, father?" Ethel went on, her voice dropping now to the mysterious undertone much used by people in speaking of the supernatural.

"Nonsense, it was an owl; they always fly towards the light, and there were the dirty marks of its feet on the door next morning," said Miss Keziah, in an irritable tone. She was not a Lester, and any mention of the supposed peculiarity attaching to the family was certain to arouse her resentment.

"It was a very peculiar owl, I should think, seeing we have never had a similar experience," retorted Ethel; then to her father, she said, "Tell me all about it, father; I've only heard a half-and-half account."

But Mark Lester shivered with a strong distaste, as unwilling to speak of the occurrence as Miss Keziah herself, though from a widely different reason. She scoffed at the

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bare suggestion of a warning being given, refused to believe in it, and deemed those who did as on a level with imbeciles, and such-like weak-witted persons. He, on the contrary, believed implicitly in the old tradition of his family, but held it in such awe as never of his own accord to mention the subject; hence the reason that his wife knew nothing of it until it was revealed to her by Mrs. Lot Godfrey.

Even now he put his daughter off. "I know hardly more than you, Ethel; I was not at home, remember. But Mrs. Lot Godfrey was here, and she can tell you."

"It is very strange and uncanny," replied the young lady, with a shiver, and drawing nearer to the fire, as if anxious to get beyond the influence of the weird element overhanging them as a family. "Father, I'm glad the warning came to her—to mother—and not to me. I should never have had the sense to act upon it, or the courage to stay alone in the dark, either."

"Courage, fiddlesticks! What was there to be afraid of? Owls won't hurt you!" snapped Miss Keziah; and then she hurried away to the kitchen, where chaos still reigned, although the servant, who had fled from fear of fever, had returned to her duty on hearing of Mrs. Lester's illness; but one pair of hands could but poorly cope with the arrears of work that had accumulated there, and Miss Keziah, for all her energy and determination, had no very large amount of physical strength to aid her in actual toil, though she was hard to beat in the matters of planning and managing.

"You will go back early to-morrow, Ethel. I could find it in my heart to wish you had not come," her father said, with some anxiety in his tone, for the fever still raged with unabated fierceness in the village, and his concern for her was only what might have been expected.

"I shall wait until the doctor has been," serenely answered Miss Ethel, who, with her feet planted on the fender, was

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looking the picture of comfort. "If he says that mother will get better, I'll depart with all speed, for I don't want to catch the fever, and I loathe Stillwater in the winter. But if he thinks she is going to die, I shall stay here;" and she caught her breath in an involuntary sob, for death to the young is always terrible.

Mark Lester's face gathered a look of exceeding anguish; he had almost relinquished hope himself, but it hurt him none the less, when others showed signs of despair also.

Ethel saw the pain her words had caused, and did her best to comfort him with all the assuring things she could think of regarding the soundness of Mrs. Lester's constitution. But privately she wrote to Raymond that night, bidding him come at once, if he would see his step-mother alive again.

She wrote to Mr. Josiah Dawe in the same strain; and when both letters were despatched, sat down to wait, with what patience she might, for permission to enter the sick room.

That was long in coming, for Mrs. Lot Godfrey was jealous exceedingly of any intrusion in the chamber where she reigned supreme. And, actuated as she was by her fear of what Mrs. Lester in her delirium might say, she became a perfect dragon on guard. But Ethel was not lightly to be put aside; she had not travelled from Bath, walking five miles from the station, in order to see her mother, only to be put off with an excuse; and quietly watching her opportunity, stole into the room when the old woman was momentarily engaged about something else, and walked boldly up to the bed.

Mrs. Lester was lying with her eyes open, and talking in a low, but earnest tone to some imaginary auditor.

"I never felt sure of it myself, not even when I saw him lying dead," she was saying; "and when that tombstone was erected to his memory, I felt quite certain he would come back, if only to spite us. Ah! there he is,

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behind the screen yonder, listening to what we are saying. Come forth into the light, Leon Desart, and let everyone know you for what you are ——"

But Ethel, frightened out of her senses, stayed to hear no more, and rushed in a panic from the sick-room, almost knocking over Mrs. Lot Godfrey, who was entering.

Downstairs sped Ethel, and into the dining-room, where the table was laid ready for tea. Her father was there, talking to the doctor, who stood warming his hands by the fire, before going up to the sick chamber.

"Father, father, it is dreadful!" she wailed, not heeding the presence of the doctor.

"What is the matter?" demanded Mark Lester, with alarm in his tone; for with his wife so ill, he lived in a state of continual strain.

"She is talking of such dreadful things—that her first husband is alive, and in the room."

"Hush!" It was the doctor who spoke, not Mark, who was for the moment too much taken aback to reply.

Ethel stared at him in surprise, wondering at the peremptory tone; and at the same moment Miss Keziah came into the room, bearing the tea-pot in one hand, and in the other a plate of steaming hot tea-cakes, fresh from the oven.

"You will stay for tea, doctor?" she asked hospitably, putting her burden down upon the table.

"I will see my patient first, and then I will take a cup, thank you, Miss Dawe," he replied; then, turning to Ethel, brusquely requested her to show him upstairs.

This, on the face of it, seemed rather unnecessary, seeing he had been going up and down once or twice a day for the last fortnight, and might surely have known the way to the sick-room by this time. Ethel, however, followed him meekly enough, guessing that she was in for a lecture of some sort, and might as well get it over without further delay.

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"Miss Ethel," said he, when once they were fairly out of earshot of the lady behind the tea-tray, "what a very indiscreet young lady you are."

This remark not specially calling for an answer, Ethel gave it none, only hung her head like a culprit, her colour deepening under his gaze.

"In the first place, you went into Mrs. Lester's room without permission, I judge," he continued gravely; "and then, in the second place, you come flying downstairs, wondering and exclaiming over what is really only a perfectly natural feature of delirium—that the mind, through bodily torture, should revert to the bitterest mental anguish it has ever known."

"But I only spoke of it; where is the harm?" asked Ethel, defiantly.

"It would make Mrs. Lester very uncomfortable to hear of all this, when she recovers, as we hope and trust she will," rejoined the doctor; "and with this in our minds, we guard against the probabilities as much as possible."

"Is that why Mrs. Lot Godfrey won't let Aunt Keziah set foot in mother's room?" asked Ethel, with a sudden comprehension of the situation.

The doctor bowed, speech being just then superfluous.

"But I don't understand ——" began Ethel, who burned to know why Aunt Keziah should be especially feared, and kept at a distance in this fashion.

"Be content not to understand," he replied, with a smile; and, waving his hand, disappeared into the sick-room.

It was a long time before he came down for his cup of tea; so long, that Miss Keziah had fresh water boiled, and another lot of tea made, before he appeared to drink it.

When he came his face was very grave, and he asked that Dr. Allandale, of Ford, might be sent for, also a trained nurse; not to supersede the faithful old woman who had toiled so unweariedly, but to assist her in a task so much

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too heavy for one pair of hands, however devoted they might be.

Mark Lester himself undertook the journey to Ford, ten miles on a moonlight night being no great task to a man as used to driving about at all hours as he was. Besides, there was no telegraph office in Stillwater, and consequently no means of getting the doctor, or nurse either, except by going for them.

It was a night long to be remembered at the Priors. No one—not even the tired maid in the kitchen—dreamed of going to bed, and the weary hours wore themselves away with relentless slowness.

Mark Lester came back shortly after midnight, accompanied by Dr. Allandale and the nurse, both of whom betook themselves at once to the sick-room, and the fight for life against death went on.

Miss Keziah and Ethel sat in the dining-room, hardly daring to speak to each other even in whispers; but Mark, finding the house intolerable, betook himself to the darkness outside, tramping up and down on the gravel path with the air of a man distraught.

The moon had gone down by this time, and only the quiet stars showed gem-like in the darkness overhead.

"Spare her, in Thy great mercy, O God!" he pleaded, and knew not in his ignorance that the day would dawn for him when he would be ready to curse his Maker for that answered prayer.

"Spare her," he cried! "O Lord, take all I have, only leave me my wife!"

The stars disappeared one by one; huge masses of cloud swept up from the south-west; the wind howled dismally through the empty tree-tops, and a dash of fine rain stung Mark's face as he walked.

But he did not go in. The thought of the woman upstairs in her direful agony made a coward of him, and he stayed on and on, until the chill of his wet clothes seemed

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to penetrate right through him, and he shivered as if with an ague.

Then the house door was flung hastily open, and Ethel appeared on the threshold.

"Father, father!" she called, in an eager undertone. "Father, where are you?"

How his tongue clave to his mouth then! and his heart beat to suffocation almost. "I am here," he faltered, yet not daring to go a step forward for the tidings she had to communicate.

Down the path ran Ethel, totally regardless of the rain that was falling, and reaching her father, she flung her arms round him, hugging him vigorously, and crying, in a voice between tears and laughter, "The doctor came downstairs a minute ago: the infant is born, and mother may live!"

Mark Lester drew a long breath, and brushed his hand hastily across his eyes, while his cheeks grew wet with something that was not rain. "Thank God," he murmured, "for His great and infinite mercy."

And so untimely came Alice Lester's child into the world, and, with its birth, disappeared for ever those torturing visions that had haunted her since the night of her lonely vigil at Deep Dykes.

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CHAPTER XI.

Out of the Darkness.

TWO quiet, uneventful years passed away, and it was winter again in Stillwater. But there had been no floods this autumn, and no sickness either, saving such cases of infantile ailments, or of senile decay, as are common to every hamlet and town on the face of God's earth.

Mrs. Wynter was dead, and the Limes was shut up. Most of her money had gone back to her deceased husband's family, although she had left Ethel Lester a legacy of five hundred pounds, in gratitude for the cheery companionship which had so brightened the close of her life. One other legacy she left, and that was to Mrs. Lester, formerly Mrs. Desart, *née* Alice Redmayne, thirty pounds a year as long as she should live, in case of need. So the will ran, and when the legatee heard of it, she turned ghastly white, and came near to fainting on the spot.

There was no relationship between Mrs. Lester and the deceased lady, but Miss Caroline Redmayne—who had reared the orphan Alice—was an old school friend of Mrs. Wynter's, and the friendship had lasted as long as their lives.

"'In case of need;' what could Mrs. Wynter have meant?" queried Mark Lester, in surprise. "Did the old lady think we were on the road to the workhouse, I wonder?"

To this question no answer could be forthcoming, seeing that the testatrix was dead, and the knowledge of her intentions had died with her. But the legacy was paid

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duly, according to her instructions, and Alice, having no immediate use for the money, allowed it to accumulate as a little dowry for Lillith, when she should be grown.

The winter set in with unusual rigour that year—biting frost and deep snow being the order of things before December was a week old. Then a sudden thaw set in, and the snow disappeared as fast almost as it had come, saving for a few ominous white patches under the hedge-rows, and in the hollows of the hills, that stayed on, as if waiting for more to come.

Mark Lester had been over to Clorpe one evening, and was returning through Ducklington, having had business in that place which necessitated the longer round, when he overtook a man, bowed and lame, who was slowly and painfully making his way through the deep mud left by the thaw.

He put up a hand as if in entreaty, and Mark Lester immediately drew rein.

"May I ask, sir, is this the road to Stillwater?" enquired the stranger, in refined and cultured tones, though outwardly he had the appearance of a common tramp.

"Yes, it is; but there is five miles of muddy road like this to be gone over before you can reach it," replied Mark, surprised by the man's mode of speech, and, at the same time, repelled by the sinister expression of the face that was upturned to his, as seen in the light of the dog-cart lamp.

Something like a groan burst from the wayfarer at the mention of the distance, and then, as if to emphasize his claim of belonging to the tramping fraternity, he put up his hand, with a true professional whine, "For the love of Heaven, kind sir, give me a trifle to find me a supper and bed, for surely I'll never do five miles of this road, lame as I am, and half-starved as well!"

"I'll give you a trifle, certainly. But why didn't you stay for the night at the Rushton workhouse, where you

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might have been kept warm and comfortable?" asked Mr. Lester, fumbling in his pocket for a sixpence.

"I couldn't shelter in a workhouse, sir," replied the wayfarer, emphatically.

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Lester, who, as a member of the board, had a guardian's blind faith in the comfort and rest to be found within the walls of a workhouse.

"Because I've got a wife, sir, and though through poverty I've dragged her low enough, I'll spare her the mortification of knowing her husband had sunk so low as the casual ward, even though I were found dead under a hay-stack some morning."

"A wife, have you? Poor thing, and where is she?" Mark asked, a thrill of indefinable pity stirring in his heart for the unfortunate woman whose fate was linked with that of the miserable beggar before him, for the cultured intonation of the unknown did but serve to show how far he must have fallen, before reaching his present wretched plight.

"That is just what I am trying to find out myself," rejoined the other, with a sharp look at his questioner, which, however, Mark failed to see. "She was living about this neighbourhood some four or five years ago, I heard. Perhaps, if you belong to these parts, you may know her."

"What was her name?" queried the prosperous master of the Priors, with never so much as a creeping chill down his spine, to warn him of what was coming.

"Mrs. Leon Desart; she was in a situation of some sort, I believe, though I don't know the name of the people she was living with," retorted the man, with another keen look at that other man perched in the dog-cart, whose appearance betokened such a comfortable supply of this world's gear and gold.

A pause, that might be reckoned in seconds on the clock-face, but which stood to the man in the cart as ages of anguish, and a blinding torment of pain, that seemed to him like the pang that rends asunder soul and body. But

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he controlled his voice with a mighty effort. "I know every man, woman, and child for miles around, and there is no Mrs. Leon Desart here," he said, in slow, decisive tones, though the heart within him waxed faint, and its courage became as water.

"Nor ever has been?" demanded the man in rags, fixing the other with his baleful eyes.

It was the question Mark expected; and he rallied his forces to answer it, telling his lie in the same tone of calm decision he had used before, only with perhaps a shade more earnestness in it: "Nor ever has been."

It was the first untruth that had sullied his lips since the day, so long ago, when he had made his christian profession, and joined the church. For he was not one of those up-to-date christians, who deem that in the world it is expedient to do as the world does, and who tell their lies, big and little, black and white—if colour conditions can be said to have a place in inveracity—with the same calm confidence an avowed son of Belial would assume for the occasion.

But for Mark Lester that one deliberate falsehood spelled doom; it shut him out of the church; it shut him out of heaven. Whether man would ever know it or not, mattered little; *he* knew it, and God knew it; and from henceforth he would be as one accursed, since he had sinned with his eyes open, and had not repented.

"Is there another Stillwater, do you expect?" the tramp asked, in a baffled tone; and Mark started at the sound of his voice, having momentarily forgotten him, being absorbed in his own fall from grace.

A sudden recollection came into his mind of a remark Dr. Allandale had made, on the night when he had driven to Ford to fetch a second doctor and a trained nurse—the night when Lillith was born. The doctor had laughingly remarked that it seemed to be his fate to be called out to consultations at places named Stillwater; for he had been

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so summoned only two weeks previously, when in the north of England, on a visit to his native place.

"Why, yes; there is another village bearing the same name, I know, but whether in Lancashire or Yorkshire I can't be certain. It is wide of Clitheroe, I know; but that is all," Mark answered, eagerly; too eagerly, since it helped to betray him to the man whose eyes were reading his face, as one might read the page of a book.

"Clitheroe? Why didn't you say the moon at once, seeing I've about as much chance of getting to the one as the other," rejoined the tramp, scornfully.

Mark was silent for a moment; then he said, slowly, like a man who is ashamed of his own benevolence: "I would not mind helping you with your railway fare, if I was sure your wife would be glad to see you when you find her."

"Oh, she'll be glad enough, don't you trouble, mister! Poor Alice! she was far too much in love with me, for her affection to have worn threadbare yet," he retorted, with a low, chuckling laugh, that in the ears of the listener sounded perfectly fiendish.

For a moment a wild, almost uncontrollable desire to spring from his cart and strangle him, took possession of Mark Lester; and in fancy he seemed to feel the long slender throat of the tramp in his grasp, and to hear the bones crack under the grip of his strong fingers. The momentary madness passed, however, and he leaned down towards the wretched wanderer, his manner calm and indifferent as before. "Well, if I were in her place, I don't think I should want you back; but we're not all made alike, God knows. And since you say she loves you, why that, of course, is proof positive she'll give you a welcome. Can you clamber up here beside me, and then I'll turn my horse round and drive you to the Rushton station; it isn't very far, but if you are lame you wouldn't very likely be in time for the next train, and would probably have to wait an hour or two."

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The man clambered up the high step with never a word of thanks, and silently took his seat, whilst Mark turned his horse's head, and lashed the creature into a furious gallop.

Not another word did the two men exchange during that short, sharp drive to the station. When it was reached, the train was already signalled; and, jumping down from the dog-cart, Mark Lester left his horse to take care of itself, whilst he went into the station and bought a ticket for the tramp.

"There," he said, putting it with some loose silver into his hand, "here comes the train; get in with you; it's lucky I drove you, or certainly you would never have been here in time."

The wayfarer mumbled something inaudible in reply, and slouched—wretched bundle of rags and dirt that he was—into an empty third-class carriage, in the rear of the train.

Close by the door stood Mark Lester, grim and stern, like a gaoler who holds a prisoner in custody, and a scornful gleam came into the eyes of the tramp as he watched him. "Kind sir," he whined, using his professional tone now, craning his head through the open window, and peering at the gentleman whose benevolence must have been, to say the least of it, surprising, "won't you tell me your name, that I may bless my benefactor?"

"I care nothing for your blessings, or your cursings either, for the matter of that," replied Mark, harshly; "and to know my name will serve you nothing."

The tramp writhed and grimaced, in an exaggeration of deferential humility; then, as the train began to move, took off his ragged, battered hat with a flourish, though a keen observer might have thought there was quite as much sarcastic triumph as obsequious salute in the action.

Mark Lester stood watching the train glide slowly out of the station, with an ever-quickening movement, into the dark country beyond.

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Just then a hand was laid on his shoulder, and a cheery voice said in his ear: "Why, Mr. Lester, if I had known that you were coming to Rushton for this train I would have begged a lift, and saved the fare from Beaumont Field, but you spoke of going straight home."

Mark Lester turned with a half start, like one who is roused suddenly from sleep. The gentleman who had accosted him was Mr. Scott, the minister of the Clorpe congregational chapel; and Mark had been at his house not two hours previously.

"I did expect to go straight home," he answered, in a dull, heavy tone; "was part of the way there, in fact, when I happened on a poor fellow in trouble, who had mistaken his way, so I turned my horse round, and drove him to the station."

"I thought it was something of the sort," exclaimed Mr. Scott, in a burst of enthusiasm. "There never was your equal in kind, disinterested benevolence. But you will get your reward for it some day."

"I hope I may," broke in Mark, grimly, thinking it would be reward enough if he never saw or heard of the tramp again.

But Mr. Scott was not to be baulked of the finish of his sentence: "If not in this world, then in the next, my friend, where no false judgment can intervene to despoil the saints of the honours they have won."

Mark winced, and with difficulty suppressed a groan; he was thinking of the lie he had told, the sin that as yet was between himself and God, since man had not discovered it.

"I must be going, I shall be late home," he answered, shortly; and then, with a brief good-night to Mr. Scott, he mounted into his dog-cart once more, and turned his horse's head in the direction of home.

Mr. Scott looked after him in a little surprise; never before had the good man seen his senior deacon with such a

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look of gloom on his face, or heard him speak in so harsh a tone.

"A fine fellow, very, but just a little over-sensitive, perhaps, in the matter of his own virtues," soliloquized the minister, as he made his way from the station into the town, whither he had come to attend a meeting of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

But Mark Lester, out alone on the dark highway, dropped the reins on to the horse's neck letting it go as it would; and, covering his face with his hands, drank his fill of the cup of bitterness that was held to his lips that night.

His wife, who was more to him than his own life—not his wife at all, but tied to that skulking tramp with the lame leg and the baleful eyes! How cruel was destiny, how fiendish fate! Should he curse God and die? But no, not yet—a hundred things might happen; meanwhile, he was going home, home to his wife—his wife and Lillith.

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CHAPTER XII.

God's Child.

LILLITH, the daughter that had been born to Mark Lester and his wife Alice, was just two years old, an age when the average child is ripe for mischief and misadventure, alternating, as a rule, between falling down and breaking its head, and throwing something else down and breaking that instead.

But Lillith Lester was not an average child, and already her mother had spent many hours of grieving over the beautiful bit of still life God had put into her arms to rear.

It was Mrs. Lot Godfrey who first noticed the strangeness, or, at least, it was she who first gave it utterance. "Sure, ma'am, the babe is God's child; and for all she's so still and so sweet, her brain has not begun to live at all;" and the old woman's tears fell fast on to the beautiful baby face that lay in her arms.

In Fordshire, children such as this one, whose bodies grew whilst their minds stood still, were always called God's children, because of the prevalent superstition that the Almighty held their wits in His own keeping, through fear of their being corrupted by sin. Hence, these witless ones were deemed without sin, and pure in the eyes of the Holiest.

"Oh, she will take notice by-and-bye; she is so young yet," cried Mrs. Lester, snatching the infant in her jealous fear from the old woman's arms, and folding it closely to her breast, as if she would hide its lack there, that the searching gaze of the world might never find it out, and comment upon it.

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"Yes, yes, time will show. Dear lamb, how sweet and good she is!" and Mrs. Lot Godfrey wiped her tears away with her apron, and went off to her lonely cottage to pray for a blessing on the hapless little one that was not as other infants were.

As time passed on, others spoke of the strange lack of intelligence displayed by the infant, until at length Alice got used to hearing it mentioned, though the pain was just as keen as at the first, when Mrs. Lot Godfrey had voiced her own dumb dread.

Then, at her urgent request, Mark drove her and the child to Ford one day, to consult Dr. Allandale.

That gentleman, although not a brain specialist, was yet reckoned the first physician of the county, and on that occasion, moreover, he chanced to have an asylum doctor visiting him, whom he promptly summoned to his aid in diagnosing the mental status of the still, white babe, who gazed into his face with calm eyes that never wavered, nor showed the faintest stir of fear or unrest in their deep blue depths.

Dr. Allandale took the child into his arms, though Alice was loth to yield her treasure even for a moment.

"How old is she now?" he asked, after some minutes spent in carrying the infant about the room, showing it this thing and that, yet never, for all his trying, succeeding in bringing a gleam of intelligence into the calm eyes that so unflinchingly gazed into his own.

"A year and nine months," the mother answered, for this visit had been paid at the end of the previous summer.

"What do you think of it?" asked Dr. Allandale, shortly, turning as he spoke to the asylum doctor, and dropping the infant into his arms.

The roughness and suddenness of the action were premeditated, but they elicited no cry of protest from the child as she was tumbled into the grasp of this second stranger.

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Mrs. Lester rose from her chair in alarm at this unexpected treatment of her little daughter, but Dr. Allandale put his hand on her arm with an authoritative gesture. "Sit down; we will not hurt the babe, but we must discover to what extent she is lacking."

The distressed mother sat down then, clasping her hands tightly together to help her maintain her self-control, but there was no need for her to quake and tremble. The infant gave no sign of joy or fear, though the asylum doctor trotted it to market on his knee, with as much gusto as if it had been one of his own bright babes at home; and, taking off its dainty white bonnet, thrust his fingers amongst the softly curling hair that clustered so thickly above the smooth white brow.

"The head is well formed," he said to Dr. Allandale; "see here, no organ seems unduly obtrusive, and, on the other hand, most of them are sufficiently marked to be discernible to the touch—the child should not be imbecile."

"Nor will be, in my opinion," replied Dr. Allandale, whose fingers had likewise been busy among those golden curls.

"Thank God!" murmured Alice, with an irrepressible sob, as she rose to her feet, and stretched forth her arms for the child.

"In a minute, madam. I'm fond of children, as I've good reason to be, seeing I've seven small ones of my own," said the asylum doctor, with a beaming smile, and Alice sat down again in greater content now; for surely a man who had seven children of his own might be trusted to nurse her babe for five minutes without letting it fall, or otherwise damaging it.

Turning the infant so that its face was exactly opposite to him, he began to sing, in a mellow tenor voice, a lilting, cheerful air at the first, but changing by slow degrees to a wailing minor key. At first, Lillith stared at him in the serene, unmoved fashion that was her wont; then into the

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blue eyes came a hint of trouble as the melody became more plaintive, until the corners of her mouth drooped, the blue eyes filled with tears, and an unmistakable wail of protest broke from her.

Instantly the asylum doctor dropped the minor key, and began carolling a nursery ballad with boyish abandon. Lillith ceased to cry, and stared at him again in a calm, meditative fashion that most people would have found disconcerting, even in so small a child.

On and on sang the asylum doctor; now it was a popular street song, then one of Kipling's regimental ditties set to a rollicking military air, again it was a sentimental love song, followed by the fragment of a hymn, and so into a minor key once more.

They all three gazed intently at the child now, and scarcely had the three first notes, sad, weird, and slow, dropped from the asylum doctor's lips, than Lillith's tears gushed forth again, and doleful baby-lamentation followed.

He stopped singing then, and gave the child back to Mrs. Lester, saying briskly, "The infant is not without intelligence, as you will have seen, but at present it is dormant; put it poetically, and you might say her soul is asleep. Music, at present, is the only thing that can reach it, but from that, for a time, she must be jealously guarded, lest the weak tissues of the brain be over-taxed, and so you destroy the child's one chance of becoming as her fellows."

"Yes, Mrs. Lester," put in Dr. Allandale, "the little maiden must have of your best in every way. No hardship must touch her, not even the necessary rigour of discipline yet. Treat her for a while as irresponsible, and then, maybe, in the years that are to come, you will reap the reward of your patience and care."

Alice thanked the doctors and departed, her heart lightened of half its load of sorrow and apprehension, through the knowledge gained concerning Lillith's mental status.

No need to tell her that the child must have of the best,

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and be shielded from the cold winds of fate. No home nest could be softer or warmer than Lillith's, and no child could be more fondly cherished than this youngest born of Mark Lester's. His other children outvied each other in their devotion to the still, white maiden, and Miss Keziah said that if Lillith was daft, it was a thousand pities that other children were not daft too; they were so much more bideable so.

Alice was standing at the door, waiting for her husband, when he returned home on that night of his encounter with the tramp, and, at the sound of wheels on the gravel, she came running to meet him, crying eagerly, "Oh, Mark, what do you think Lillith has done this evening?"

The man, sick and sore with that terrible rending anguish which was tearing at his heart, strove, nevertheless, to meet his wife as if nothing had happened, and answered her lightly enough, though his face was grey with suffering, "How should I know? Has she been climbing a tree, whistling a dance tune, or standing upon her head?"

Alice laughed. How light-hearted she felt to-night! "Not quite that yet, though she may do it all in good time. Daisy found her sitting on the hearth-rug, nursing the cat, and singing to it—actually singing to it!"

"I hope the creature did not scratch her," replied Mark, getting hurriedly down from the dog-cart, almost as excited as his wife over this astonishing development in their sweet, silent maiden.

"No, no; it was only old Tib, and she would not hurt a child, however much it pulled her about. I feel so happy, Mark, so very, very happy. If only Lillith's brain comes right, there will seem nothing in life left to wish for!" she said, in a low, thrilling tone, leaning her head against his arm, and putting up her hand to gently stroke his face.

It was almost more than the man could bear, this joyous prattle of perfect happiness, whilst Nemesis waited on the path just ahead of them.

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But again he choked his misery back. Let her rest untroubled to-night. Sorrow would come quite soon enough; they might as well keep the happiness so long as they could.

So he returned her caress, and Oliver coming up at the moment to lead the horse round to the stable, he went indoors with his wife to find Lillith, and rejoice over her wonderful new accomplishment.

All the family were at home now, except Raymond and Donald, the former being still in Lincolnshire, whilst the latter was at school in Ford.

Ethel was superintending the laying of the table for an early supper or late tea, just as the partakers chose to regard it; she had grown very useful and domesticated of late, which development was in part owing to the fact that she was looking forward to having a home of her own at no very distant date, and was wisely training for the responsibility.

She noticed at once what Alice had failed to observe, that was, her father's look of heavy care, and his evident depression of spirits.

"What is the matter, father?" she asked, giving a twist to the bowl of chrysanthemums in the centre of the table, and then standing back to judge the effect of the alteration. "Have you been quarrelling with Mr. Scott, or have you heard anything upsetting in the village?"

"Neither the one nor the other. Mr. Scott and I do not quarrel; and the village did not show sufficient signs of life to be upsetting, as I came through," he answered, dropping into a chair, and looking frightfully worn out.

"Then you are in for a touch of influenza, by the look of it," she said, decidedly; and really, at the moment, Mark was feeling ill enough to warrant the suggestion.

Alice had been upstairs to see that Lillith wanted for nothing, the child having been put to bed later than usual that evening. When she re-entered the room, Ethel drew

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her attention to the indisposition of the master of the house, and speedily aroused her fears on his account.

For a wonder, he was plastic in their hands that night, submitting without a protest to being hurried off to bed, swallowing gruel without a murmur, though it was well known that he loathed the sight of it, and even permitting a hot-water bottle to be placed in his bed.

Truth to tell, he wanted to be quiet, to be relieved of the necessity of talking, or of answering questions; and there was no way but this in which he might be silent, without exciting the comment which just then he feared so greatly.

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CHAPTER XIII.

At the Rear of the Train.

THE next morning it was snowing again, and Alice, with true wifely care and consideration, would not permit her husband to rise until after breakfast.

If he was not down with influenza, so much the better; but a little indulgence would not hurt him, she said, with a laugh, as she put Lillith on the bed beside him, and went herself downstairs to set the household machinery moving.

Mark had spent the night in a vigil of painful forebodings and terrible apprehensions of the future. It could not be long, he thought, before the tramp who called himself Leon Desart, would discover how he had been duped, and would return to take his revenge by revealing his identity. He might even light upon that very substantial tombstone which had been erected to his memory in Stillwater churchyard, and thus see for himself how complete had been the misconception regarding his death.

There was a certain grim humour about that part of the situation, and Mark was only deterred from laughing aloud by his fear of arousing his wife. Then followed speculations on the course that would have to be followed, whether he and Alice would be forced to live apart, because this low-lived, dastardly scoundrel still cumbered God's earth.

Towards morning, his painful musings had given place to uneasy slumber, broken by hideous nightmare, but he had arrived at no conclusion concerning what course to take, and resumed his conflicting train of thought when Alice had risen, and left him alone. He took no notice of Lillith. She was so quiet that he imagined she might be

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asleep, when, to his amazement, she broke into a low, wordless song. He turned quickly then to look at her; she was lying just as her mother had left her, with her big blue eyes fixed on the window, her lips moving in a sort of instinctive rhythm, whilst the sweet crooning went on, as if the little sleeping soul might be stirring to wakefulness at last.

He did not venture to touch her, feeling fearful of disturbing the happy frame of mind that had evoked the song, and lay watching her until Alice entered hurriedly, with consternation on her face.

His heart leaped with terror at the sight of her countenance, then fairly stood still with horror, his first thought being that Leon Desart had come already to taunt him with his lie, and to steal his wife away.

"There was a railway accident last night just outside Ford, Mark," she said, a little breathlessly.

"Ah, were there many killed? Was it the Rushton train?" he asked, his heart beginning to palpitate with a wild excitement of fear and unrest.

"Oliver does not know how many. Jim Barnes, who was at Ford last night, says there was certainly one, a poor man at the rear of the train, who is supposed to have got in at Rushton," Mrs. Lester answered, stooping to kiss Lillith, who had ceased her crooning, and lay gazing up into her mother's face.

"How did it happen?" he demanded, in a choked tone, the fear and unrest merging into a sort of joyful certainty that Providence had intervened to save his life from a disaster that would have been worse than death.

"A goods train from Yardworth crashed into the end of the Rushton train, and smashed the rear carriages to fragments. Indeed, it is said that the poor body is so mangled and mutilated as to be quite unrecognizable," Alice said, her eyes dilating at the thought of the tragedy.

Mark Lester drew a long breath of relief, and off rolled

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that heavy burden of care that had bowed his heart since the previous evening. "Poor wretch," he exclaimed, though, truth to tell, there was little of sorrow or commiseration in his tone; "but better to be killed outright than to drag on, maimed and halt, through years of weary suffering."

"That depends," answered Alice, softly; "perhaps he has a wife, and think what his death must mean to her, poor thing."

Aye, he did think, and wondered, as he lay looking at her, what she would say if he was to tell her how that man's death affected her personally.

That this unfortunate victim was the same individual who had accosted him, and whom he had driven to the station, there could be little doubt, since that train did not stop until it got to Ford, and there had been no other passenger in any of the end carriages.

If this was so, then he, Mark, was free, saving only for the stain of that lie, which, alas and alas! being unrepented of, must serve to drag him down lower and yet lower from the high elevation of rectitude and untarnished virtue, on which it had been his pride and delight to stand.

But he need cower from the eyes of man no longer, since none there were who could point the finger of scorn at him, and say, "Behold this man's dishonour." So he shook off the feeling of illness and exhaustion that was the outcome of his mental strife, and, rising from his bed, betook himself to his daily avocations, despite the protestations of his wife and Ethel, who would fain have made an invalid of him, for that one day, at least.

Until darkness had fallen, he stayed abroad in the fields, feeling that only in the open air could he breathe that day, and when at length he did return to his home, he could scarcely walk for weariness.

"Daddy, what a naughty man you are! If ever anyone deserved to be ill, surely it is you!" exclaimed Ethel,

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meeting him in the big kitchen—for he had entered the house by the back door—and forcibly dragging him off to the dining-room.

Even Alice chid him gently for his lack of prudence, but he answered only that he had been busy, then enquired if any more details were forthcoming about the Ford railway disaster.

"Nothing," she said, as he poked the fire to a brighter blaze, "except a confirmation of the news Oliver had brought in the morning. No one else seems to have been seriously hurt. The inquest on the poor man who was killed is to be to-morrow, but unless some one comes forward to claim him, they say identification will be quite impossible, as the body was so terribly mutilated."

"Ah," rejoined Mark, thoughtfully; and then relapsed into a long silence.

That evening, when Mrs. Lester had taken Lillith to bed, and Theodore and Daisy were doing their lessons in the adjoining room, Ethel came to kneel down by her father's chair, and leaning her head against the hand that he had stretched forth towards the glow of the fire, faltered out a confidence that had cost her much in the making.

"Daddy, I'm going to join the church. Are you glad?"

"Church? What church?" he asked, with a start, a chill of foreboding creeping over him at this statement, which, two days before, would have yielded him nothing but the purest joy.

"The church at Clorpe, your church," she said, a little hurt at his reception of her tidings, whilst a few unbidden tears rose to her eyes and brimmed over. "I love Christ, and I want to be numbered among His people," she whispered, and then the few stray tears became a shower, and she hid her face in her hands, that he might not see how moved she was from her wonted self-control.

The hand he laid on her bowed head trembled visibly, whilst his whole form cowered and shook as if with ague.

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"Have you thought of all that it means, Ethel, of the profession you must live up to, the consistent daily walking before God, with the eyes of the world upon you, and, above all, the renunciation that you may have to make in matters closest to your heart?"

"Daddy, I have thought of it all, and, before I wrote to Mr. Scott, I told Hubert that I had come to the parting of the ways, and I was ready to renounce even his love, if necessary, in order to serve Christ among His people. But Hubert said that same desire of service had been growing in his heart, too, and so, dear, we shall join the church together. I have often talked to mother about it, but I never could get the courage to speak to you before."

And even now that she had mustered her forces to make her little confession, he did not seem able to help her much, did not even bless her, as she knelt expectantly before him, and a keen pang of disappointment quivered through her heart as she realized that her father was not so glad as she had expected him to be.

"It is a great surprise to me, Ethel," he said, at length, keeping his voice steady by an effort. "I had grown to believe that both you and Hubert Palmer would join the established church; I did not doubt your love for Christ, or his either, but I had long since relinquished my hope of seeing you in the home fold," he said, feeling that speech was expected of him, yet hardly conscious of the words he spoke.

It was cruel suffering for him to know that his child would join the church at the very time when he must leave it; and leave it he must, since he could not retain his standing in grace with that unrepented lie on his soul.

That night he wrote to Mr. Scott, resigning his office of deacon, and asking that his name might be cut off the church-roll, giving as his reason for this request that his heart was not right before God, and it would be only adding sin to sin for him to retain his old position in the church.

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Blank consternation seized upon Mr. Scott when he read this letter, and he set off at once to Stillwater Priors to reason with his senior deacon, to pray with him, and, if possible, to induce him to recall that letter of resignation.

But he might have spared himself the trouble, for Mark Lester would not be reasoned with, and though he permitted Mr. Scott to pray aloud in his presence, he in no way responded, or entered into the exercise himself. And the good man rose from his knees with a baffled sensation of complete failure. His inducements towards the recall of the letter were likewise futile, and he left the Priors that day with a sadder heart than he had borne during any of his twelve years' ministry at Clorpe.

Christmas came and passed with its usual amount of jollification and merriment. But the lame beggar made no sign, and Mark Lester began to breathe freely once more.

The adjourned inquest on the mutilated fragments of humanity found in the shattered rear carriage of the Rushton train, failed to elicit any clue to the identity of the victim, and the verdict was at last given in accordance with these circumstances, the remains being buried in a nameless grave; whilst the master of the Priors often let his steps wander through that part of the churchyard where stood the tombstone of Leon Desart, though what possible gratification or consolation the sight brought to him it would be hard to say.

On the first Sunday in January came the exceeding bitter trial of Mark Lester; for it was the day when his daughter Ethel and her betrothed, Hubert Palmer, were received into the fellowship of the church at Clorpe, and it was likewise the first occasion of his banishment from the communion-table. Of course, even with his name cut off the roll of the church, he might have joined in the celebration as an outsider, but, being an honest man, he could not do this, and left the chapel at the close of the first service, with the blackest, bitterest misery in his heart that he had ever known.

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Many curious heads were turned to see him go, and many a whispered comment passed along, as the members gathered into their places in the centre of the building. For the Church Militant differs from the Church Triumphant in this, as in many other things; and no man, be he sinning or saintly, may hope to escape the criticism of his fellows in the faith until he has passed from the one to join the other.

Josiah Dawe and his sister, Miss Keziah, had driven over from Bockley Bent, which was seven miles from Clorpe on the side opposite to Stillwater. And on no faces was the consternation heavier than on theirs. Some rumours had indeed reached them of impending changes, but nothing half so disastrous as Mark's complete severance from the church had ever entered into their heads, and his action came to them as a dreadful shock.

Josiah's rubicund visage paled visibly, except for a round spot in either cheek, where the colour was warranted fast, and on which floods of emotion might make no impression. But Miss Keziah's lip trembled piteously, and she pulled down her veil to hide the tears that would fall with unabated persistency all through the service. The elements were as gall and bitterness in her mouth that morning, and when, in his concluding prayer, Mr. Scott besought the Lord to bring back into their midst the dear brother who had elected to walk apart awhile, she just leaned her head against the front of the pew, and sobbed aloud.

Hers were not the only tears by any means, and even the minister's voice was husky and broken as he brought his petitions to an abrupt close, through fear lest his emotion should unman him in the face of the congregation.

There was morning church only at Clorpe, and when the double service had come to an end, the worshippers betook themselves to their respective conveyances, and dispersed for the week.

Ethel was to spend the day with the Palmers, who lived

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only a short distance away, but before she went off with them, Miss Keziah pounced upon her, and drew her to a quiet corner beyond the reach of inquisitive ears.

"Ethel, what is the matter with your father?" she demanded, brusquely, her eyes very red, her hands twitching with nervous agitation, as she drew on her thick woollen gloves.

Ethel choked back something on her own account before she replied, and the scornful flippancy she usually observed when speaking to her aunt was entirely absent from her tone as she said, "Indeed, I don't know, Aunt Keziah, for he will tell none of us."

"Humph, I expect Mrs. Lester is at the bottom of it. When a man loves a woman as your father loves her, she is apt to make a fool of him sooner or later," rejoined Miss Keziah, bitterly; though it is only fair to state that she did not really believe in her own assertion.

Ethel's fair face flushed an indignant crimson. "How can you say such a thing about mother, Aunt Keziah? She knows no more what is the matter than you or I. And you must surely know her well enough by this time to be sure that under no circumstances would she use her influence to bring about a rupture of this kind."

"I know it sounds hard and unjust to speak of her so, seeing what she has proved herself to be to you all," admitted Miss Keziah, with most unusual humility; "but if it isn't her, what can it be?"

"How can I tell?" queried Ethel, impatiently, for she was very sore-hearted this morning, and her aunt's questions did but make the tender places get more sensitive. "Perhaps he is going to be like grandfather."

"The Lord forbid!" ejaculated Miss Keziah, with pious fervour. "What my poor mother suffered from his religious crank no living person can ever guess, and I'd not wish any one, not my bitterest enemy even, a lot such as hers was during the last years of her life."

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Ethel shivered, but made no other reply, for Hubert came up at that moment to ask if she was ready, and, bidding her aunt good-bye, she went off with her lover, more miserable than she cared to own, because of the mystery of her father's manner.

Miss Keziah took her place in the little old basket chaise beside her brother, but at the first neither of them spoke on the subject that lay nearest to their hearts, though her tears were still falling, and he seemed to have contracted a sudden cold, which necessitated much coughing, and continual use of a big red pocket-handkerchief—he had a white one in his tail pocket for use in meeting, but preferred the coloured one for all ordinary occasions.

"Poor mother! It's a big mercy she never lived to see this day," said Josiah, at length.

"Why?" snapped Miss Keziah, though she was perfectly well aware to what her brother referred.

"She set a sight o' store on Mark; he was her Benjamin, and I think it would have broke her heart to have seen him drifting."

"He'll come back," retorted Miss Keziah, shortly, though she caught her breath in a choking sob the minute after.

"Not till he's humbled, he won't, and there's a deal o' pride in step-brother Mark, as you and I know well, Keziah."

"The Lord will chasten him, if it's for his good," and Miss Keziah shut her mouth with a vicious snap, as much as to say she would have no objection to see the process of disciplining commenced straight away.

"He will do what is best, I make no doubt," Josiah said, reverently; "but there may be sore suffering in it for more than Mark himself."

Miss Keziah sniffed again, but made no other reply, and there was silence between them for the remainder of their homeward way.

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CHAPTER XIV.

Hard to Kill.

ANOTHER year slipped away, but Mark Lester still remained aloof from the church, and the mystery of his resignation was a mystery still.

He was a regular attendant at the public services, and his purse opened for the good of the cause as readily as before. But the man himself—that is, the inside, invisible part of him—had undergone a great deterioration, as serious as it was subtle.

A secret, but abiding cause of discontent had sprung up in his heart—the cause of it, his wife. And day by day the ill weed rankled and grew, though, as yet, no one—not even Alice herself—guessed it was there.

Not caring to let his thoughts dwell on religion, or anything pertaining to it, since by his own act he had cut himself adrift from interest of that kind, Mark had given himself up to retrospection and introspection of the gloomiest possible character, until he bade fair to become almost a monomaniac in that direction.

He brooded over the details of Leon Desart's death, the identification of the body by Alice, the portion of her pitiful story which leaked out at the inquest, and the subsequent information on the same subject which Mrs. Wynter imparted to him, until he became actually morbid.

He remembered how Alice had cried out that she must see the dead man's left cheek, which had been so bruised and battered by the wheel of the bicycle, and how at the inquest she had faltered in her identification, seeming to become uncertain in her tone, which circumstance—

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attributed at the time to natural emotion—in the light of his later knowledge, Mark began to put down to actual doubt, on her part, as to whether the dead man was her husband in reality.

That there might have been a likeness, was probable enough, but if she had not been sure as to Leon's personality, she might have said so, and saved the good old name of Lester the startling disgrace that at one time had come so near to falling upon it, and he would shudder anew at the memory of what he endured during that long night following his meeting with the lame stranger who called himself by the dead man's name.

Then he would revert to that terrible delirium of Alice, at the time of her illness before the birth of Lillith—how she constantly cried out that Leon was not dead. Was it possible, he wondered, that she had seen the man during that long night vigil by the broken bridge, and her delirious fears the outcome of knowing herself the wife of two living men? When he reached this stage of his musings, his mood was apt to grow very bitter indeed, and he was careful to keep as far away from his wife as possible, through fear lest she should discover the trend of his evil thoughts. For despite all these foul suspicions that had come to harbour in his mind concerning her, he loved her still, and clung to her with, if possible, more devotion than before.

Yet, though he knew it not, this brooding on the past was all a preparation for the disaster that was to come, and which might have been, if not wholly averted, yet shorn of half its bitter anguish, but for this secret disloyalty of his towards the woman who bore his name.

January had given place to February when the catastrophe came. A mild winter it was that year, and in sheltered places adventurous primroses were already opening pale eyes to look at the sun. Mark was coming through the churchyard one sunny afternoon in the early part of

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the month, having been to look after some young lambs in the rectory close, when he espied a man, poorly dressed, standing on the gravelled path, close to Leon Desart's grave.

The old saying, "His heart jumped into his mouth," is the only expression that can adequately describe the desperate fear and horror that came to him then.

He did not stop, however, but seemed impelled forward by a will-power stronger than his own.

The man looked up as he approached, an evil smile of malicious recognition stealing over his thin face. "Ah, glad to meet you—Mr. Lester, of the Priors, I presume?" he said, taking off his hat with a flourish, the mocking gleam of his baleful eyes sending a stab of pain to the heart of the other, for it was in those same eyes that his recognition of the stranger lay, and he knew him at once for the lame beggar who had described himself as the husband of Mrs. Desart.

"Thought I was dead, did you?" asked the stranger, while Mark stared at him still, unable to utter a word. "Sorry to disappoint you, I'm sure, but somehow I am uncommon hard to kill, for all I've been twice supposed to be dead," and he tapped the tombstone with his finger, as if to call attention to the name printed upon it.

"For God's sake, tell me, who are you?" panted Mark Lester, whose eyes looked ready to start out of his head, whilst the veins on his forehead swelled until they looked like thick cords.

"With pleasure; I am Leon Desart, at your service, sir;" and again the stranger bowed with that exaggeration of deference which, in some intangible manner, seemed to stir the other almost to madness.

"Then who—who lies there?" asked Mark, hoarsely, pointing to the grave.

"How should I know, seeing I was not invited to the funeral?" enquired the other, with a shrug of his shoulders.

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"He was identified as Leon Desart," uttered Mark, in a defiant tone, which he meant to be convincing.

"Who by, may I ask?" and the questioner half closed his eyes, surveying Mark through two narrow slits, just as a cat looks at the sun.

"His wife," rejoined Mark, promptly, off his guard now through terror and despair.

"Ah, very likely. Wanted to pose as a free woman, perhaps, and, in that case, what could be easier than to make the mistake, and call Philip myself, and myself Philip?"

"Who is Philip?" gasped Mark Lester, a sharper pain clutching at his heart, causing the solid ground to reel beneath his feet.

"Who *was* Philip, you mean," replied the other, with a sneer, "seeing that he is dead, and buried in my grave;" here he tapped the tombstone again with a significant finger. "Philip Desart was my cousin, and so much alike were we, that it was hard to tell us apart, saving for this scar," and he pointed to a mark on his left cheek, that looked like the remains of an old cut.

"Ah!" ejaculated Mark Lester, and—strong man though he was—he staggered, and would have fallen, but for the timely intervention of the other, who promptly caught hold of him, and propped him against a gravestone.

"Steady there, you'll be better presently," said the man, with a chuckle, as if he rather enjoyed the sensation he was making.

"And you weren't killed in the Rushton train, either?" asked Mark, feebly.

"Not I. Your most unusual benevolence raised some doubts in my mind as to whether you might not have some special reason for getting me out of the way; and I thought that I would leave the train *en route*, and prospect a little on my own account. No sooner, however, had I come to this determination, than, chancing to move and strike my foot under the seat, I discovered a comrade in misfortune

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hidden there, who was enjoying a ride at the expense of the company. Him I promptly dragged forth, and after reading him a severe lecture on his clumsy attempt to cheat the authorities, made him a present of the railway ticket which you had so generously bestowed upon me."

"Then it was this man that was killed?" asked Mark Lester, in a thick voice, feeling that heaven and hell were alike conspiring against him.

"I suppose so. But, you see, he would have been killed anyhow in the smashing of the carriage, and how much better to die sitting comfortably upon the seat with a ticket in his pocket, than if he had been snuffed out like a rat in hiding," retorted the man, with another sneer.

"Cease your blasphemy," said Mark Lester, sternly, suppressing with difficulty his desire to knock the cynical stranger down.

"As you please," retorted the other, calmly folding his arms, and leaning against the gravestone that bore his name, whilst he smiled serenely into the face of the man whose happiness he had come to ruin.

For a short time they looked at each other in silence, which was broken presently by Mark asking, in a bewildered tone, "If you got out of the train that night, how was it you did not come back sooner?"

A peculiar smile flitted over Leon Desart's saturnine countenance as he replied, "I admit I should resent that question if it had been asked by some people, but seeing the connecting link there is between us—both of us being married to the same woman—I can understand that you do not ask it out of mere vulgar curiosity. I did intend journeying to Stillwater on the very next day, but was deterred through unexpectedly meeting an acquaintance, whose desire to extend the hospitality of our gracious Queen to me was so great, that he carried me off without even the trifling formality of asking my consent, and I have been a guest of our Sovereign ever since."

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"You mean that you have been in prison?" asked Mark, with an intonation of disgust.

"To put it plainly—yes. I came out three days ago, and immediately set out again to find—my wife."

With a sound that was something between a groan and a roar of rage, Mark Lester sprang forward to fell him to the earth, but Leon saw him coming, and with a dexterous movement slipped behind the gravestone, against which Mark fell heavily.

"What is the use of your taking it so hardly? She is my wife. And what is more, she knew I wasn't dead when she married you," the man said, in a mocking tone.

"You lie!" hissed Mark, between his set teeth, though already a voice within him was whispering that this man might be telling the truth, such tangible shape had his own doubts of Alice taken of late.

"No, I don't," retorted the other; "a few weeks after Philip died, or was killed, here in Stillwater, Alice wrote to an old woman living in Greenwich to ask her if she knew which of us it really was that had died; for owing to the deceased man's left cheek being so bruised and battered, she couldn't be certain whether it was Philip or Leon. I happened to drop in to call on the old lady, a day or so after she received the letter, and assisted in answering it, indeed."

Mark's face was livid now, but the hand with which he would have felled the stranger to the earth a little while ago had dropped limply by his side, for the poison of doubt was working strongly now, paralyzing his resistance, and even causing him to wonder whether this man with the baleful eyes might not be a friend in disguise after all, come to re-instate his feet in the way of honour.

Leon's next words threw some doubt on the friend theory, however, though they did not send the balance higher up on the other side, in which lay the uprightness and honour of Alice. "What will you give me now to go

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away, and keep dark in the matter?' he asked, with a crafty leer, and the low chuckle that was so irritating to Mark.

"But in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird," and this very palpable desire to blackmail him opened Mark's eyes at once to the sort of man with whom he had to deal.

"I shall not give you anything," he replied, sternly.

"But surely you would not care to have the story come out?" urged the stranger, and now there was a flicker of anxiety in his eyes, if only Mark had been sharp enough to perceive it there.

"It is of no use to hide it. If you are Leon Desart, then legally Mrs. Lester is not my wife," said Mark, in a hard tone; and then a strong self-pity took possession of him for that fruitless lie he had told—the lie which had caused him to banish himself from the church, and which, as he believed, had shut him out of heaven. He was repenting at last, yet, even now, he was not so much sorry for having sinned, as sorry for himself that he had been tempted to sin, since the object of his sinning was not worthy.

"What will you do?" asked the other, with an uneasy feeling that perhaps, after all, he had made a mistake in the man with whom he had to deal, and had in consequence bungled his chances.

"I shall confront you with Mrs. Lester; if she denies your identity with Leon Desart, I shall denounce you as an impostor. If, on the other hand, she admits that you are her——I mean the man she first married, I shall denounce her instead," Mark Lester said, in a hard tone, that boded ill for the woman he had married.

"Very well, shall we go now?" asked Leon, briskly, though it was easy to see how nervous he was.

"Yes," retorted Mr. Lester, in the same uncompromising manner, "we will go now."

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CHAPTER XV.

Recognition.

RAYMOND Lester was at home again, and preparing to bring his Lincolnshire experience to bear upon his native Fordshire acres, with the hope of results that should astonish the simple villagers, who, in the course of a long life, rarely stirred more than once or twice beyond the confines of the county.

His father had taken a farm for him between Stillwater and Clorpe. A small holding it was, and in poor heart, which, being translated for the benefit of non-agricultural townsfolk, means that the land had been so starved out as to be almost incapable of producing a crop at all.

But he was having a short holiday before settling in to his new work, and on that sunshiny afternoon in February, had just returned from a three days' visit to London, and was giving his step-mother an account of the wonders he had seen, interspersing his descriptions with fragments of his plans for working his farm.

Ethel had come in from the schoolroom, where she had been giving Daisy a music lesson, to greet her brother, and listen to the tale of his doings in the great city; and Daisy, all unbidden, had stolen in likewise, her ostensible errand being to find out if Raymond had brought her the chocolates she had asked him to buy for her.

Theodore was also in the room, lying on a couch near the window. The boy had been more ailing than usual of late, and Alice was often secretly anxious on his account; and dearly as she loved her husband's children, there was

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not one of them to whom she clung as to the sickly, peevish boy who needed so much patient care and gentle forbearance from those who had to do with him. Mrs. Lot Godfrey stigmatized him as "A regular handful of a boy," an opinion in which his Aunt Keziah most heartily concurred.

But, strange to say, Alice had never found him hard to live with, and they had been good comrades from the very first. Lillith completed this family party, lying on her back upon a soft rug near to Theodore, not moving, not playing, not uttering a sound even, but serenely gazing at a vagrant sunbeam flung across the ceiling above her. A perfect picture of tranquility was she, the silent centre around which revolved the constant and most tender care of the household.

In the buzz of animated talk and laughter, no one heard the sudden, noisy opening of the big hall-door, or the steps outside in the hall itself.

"That was the morning Gus Rankin and I climbed to the top of the Monument. My word! but the breeze up there was fit to take the head off one's shoulders, and not bungle the business, either," said Raymond, with a laugh.

"If I went to London, I'd not waste my time going to the top of the Monument to get my head blown off. I should go up and down Regent Street, to look at the shops," put in Daisy, with an air of great superiority.

"Or picture galleries, the Tower, Westminster Abbey, or——" began Ethel; then stopped suddenly, for her father had opened the door, and was ushering a stranger into the room.

Mrs. Lester was sitting with her back to the door, and did not immediately perceive the interruption. But the others saw, and on the minds of them all the pale face and evil eyes of the unknown man would be photographed until the day of their death—all save Lillith, who neither knew nor cared who came or went, so long as the streak of

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sunshine remained on the ceiling to bring happy visions and dreams to the slumbering soul within her.

Then Alice turned, the smile of interest and amusement still hovering round her mouth—turned to find the strange man standing close beside her.

Those who looked saw the bewilderment in her face, which changed in a moment of time to recognition, and then a wild despairing shriek rang through the hush of the room.

"Leon!"

But Alice herself sunk senseless on the floor.

Ethel and Raymond sprang to her assistance, dimly conscious of disaster impending, yet neither of them able to in any degree gauge the depth of misery that must result from that one word of recognition.

Mark Lester was leaning for support against the door-post, trembling like a man with ague, but not a finger did he lift to help Alice, who lay as one bereft of life.

The man who had wrought the mischief lingered by the door, wearing the look of a craven, averting his gaze from the unconscious figure upon the floor, and equally unwilling to look at the master of the house, who leaned against the door-frame, and barred his exit.

Daisy was crying noisily, when, across the sound of her dismal boo-oo-ing, cut the note of a more mournful wail. This came from Lillith, into whose serene peace some element of trouble had already entered. At the sound of her voice, Mark Lester roused himself at once, and glaring at Leon Desart, said, in a harsh, peremptory tone, "Go! Your wife shall follow you soon!"

The man slunk hastily out, glad to escape, maybe, with a whole skin, which was certainly more than he deserved for that day's work.

Hurrying out by the big hall-door, which still stood open, he ran against an elderly man, stout, and comfortable of aspect, and with apple-red cheeks, who was at that moment entering.

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"Hoity-toity, my good man, is that the way you knock people down?" demanded this individual, who was no other than Mr. Josiah Dawe.

But Leon was in too much haste to depart to stay for more than a muttered apology, and was for rushing on again, when Mr. Dawe laid a firm, detaining grasp upon his arm. "Not so fast, my man; let us have a clear understanding before you go as to why you are making such haste in going."

Pulled up in this fashion, the culprit was perforce compelled to remain and give some account of himself. "Mr. Lester said I was to go," he answered, with a backward jerk of his head towards the room he had left.

Josiah Dawe looked then past the man he was holding, along the hall to the open door, against which the master of the house was still leaning, and, inspired by a swift intuition of ill, which yet had no shape or form, he released the man, and himself went on through the hall to learn the nature of the disaster which had plainly befallen the household.

Alice was still unconscious upon the floor, with Raymond and Ethel kneeling by her, one upon either side. But Daisy had ceased her crying, and had picked Lillith up from the rug, and carried her to Theodore's couch, where the pair of them joined efforts in consoling her.

"Hoity-toity, and what's the matter here, pray?" he exclaimed, pausing by Mark upon the threshold. "Is the missus ill?" he asked, his kindly face puckering into lines of sympathetic anxiety.

Ethel looked up with a sudden relief in her heart, for Uncle Josiah was wont to prove himself as a veritable tower of strength to all that were in trouble of any kind whatsoever.

"Uncle Josiah, will you fetch some water from the kitchen, cold water, for mother—and—and keep the maids away?" she asked.

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"Yes, my dear, I'll go," he said, in a subdued tone, stealing a look at his half-brother as he passed, and auguring only ill from the expression of his face, which was livid and drawn, distorted, in fact, by the intensity of the passion raging within.

He was absent hardly two minutes, and as he came back with the water in a pitcher in his hand, Mark Lester leaned forward, laying a heavy grip upon his shoulder. "See here, Josiah, let her have what she wants to make her better, but as soon as she can sit up again and speak, she is to go."

"Go?" echoed Mr. Josiah Dawe, blankly, nearly dropping the water-pitcher in his astonishment. "Who is to go, and where?"

"She, the woman on the floor, the woman who has deceived me, and dragged my honour in the dust. Let her go to her precious husband, who was here but a minute ago striving to get hush-money out of me. Let her go anywhere or anyhow, but she'll not bide under my roof any longer to pollute my children."

"Softly, softly, step-brother Mark," said Mr. Josiah Dawe, as, with a frightened face and quaking limbs, he managed to go forward to the table and deposit the pitcher in safety thereon, although he spilled the water in great splashes upon the table-cloth. "What has the poor thing done, that you should seek to cast her out, and she the wife of your bosom?"

"She's no wife of mine," retorted Mark, sternly; "the other man, Leon Desart, has a prior claim, it seems."

"But he's dead," persisted Mr. Josiah Dawe, obstinately; he was as stupid as an owl sometimes, and, try as he would, he could make neither head nor tail of the present situation.

Mark laughed—not a pleasant sound by any means. "You met him in the doorway as you came in; he was alive then, as you could see for yourself."

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Mr. Josiah Dawe understood now, and his kindly eyes filled with tears of pity, and he was not even ashamed to brush them away openly. "Poor dear, and she to be deceived like that! But I'd never let the other man come between, if I were you, Mark; she's your wife in the eyes of heaven, if she ain't in the eyes of earth, and 'whom God hath joined'——"

"But she knew he was not dead—knew it all the time, and tricked me into marrying her," replied Mark Lester, fiercely, his face dreadful to behold.

Mr. Josiah Dawe recoiled a step backward with horror, not so much at the statement, as at Mark's credence of it.

"But you'd not believe a thing so foul of the woman you love?" he urged, in a pleading tone, as if he would fain recall Mark to his better self. "Think what a good wife she's been to you; think of the night when she watched at Deep Dykes to save you from drowning, and she not fit to be abroad at all, poor dear! Think a scheming impostor would have done that? Not a bit of it! I tell you, Mark, it takes a woman with a conscience void of offence to go and face a risk like that," and, waxing fearless by reason of his own eloquence, the would-be peacemaker strode boldly up to his irate step-brother.

Of what avail are words, be they never so eloquent or reasonable, when a man is mad with passion? Mark Lester thrust the mediator aside, as one might brush away a teasing fly, and, merely reiterating his command that Alice should leave the Priors when consciousness returned, he left the house, banging the heavy hall-door behind him.

The jar and vibration seemed to do for Alice what the ministrations of Raymond and Ethel had failed to effect, and, with a sigh and a shiver, she opened her eyes.

At first, there was no remembrance of evil in them; the anxious faces of the three who were bending over her were accounted for by the fact that she had been ill. It was only when she attempted to recall what it was that had

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caused her to faint, that recollection came back to her, and she stared wildly into the pitying countenances to see if, haply, hope for herself might be discovered there.

Mr. Josiah Dawe and Ethel were both crying, while Raymond's face was stern and pale, and set, moreover, into a curious likeness to his father's, only instinctively the poor suffering woman felt that its sternness and hardness were not for her, and a ray of comfort, that yet had nothing of hope in it, dulled a little the bitter pain of her heart.

"Where is he?" she gasped, looking round as if in search of some one.

But no one answered, for they did not know which of the two men she meant, and they feared to torture her with questions yet.

For a few moments she lay quiet, whilst Ethel bathed her face with the water Mr. Josiah Dawe had brought from the kitchen; then she said suddenly, "Ethel, where is your father? I must see him at once, and tell him the whole truth of the matter. Oh, that I had never burned that letter!"

Ethel looked at Raymond, who, in his turn, gazed at Uncle Josiah, but no one of the three cared to undertake the task of explanation, and equally they forgot the children, who were huddled together on the couch by the window.

Alice read something of their hesitation in their averted glances, yet with no clue to the understanding of it. No fear that Mark could doubt her truth had ever entered her mind; she would have believed in him through good and evil report alike, and that his faith should be of poorer make than her own, was totally incomprehensible to her.

"Where is he?" she cried, struggling to a sitting posture, though with difficulty, for she was weak yet from the cruel shock. "Why has he gone away—is he ill?" this with a sudden inflection of concern, fearing lest the effect of the recognition had been as disastrous to him as to herself.

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Then Daisy, hot-headed and impulsive, as young things are apt to be, came rushing from the couch to fling herself upon her step-mother, sobbing distractedly, "Oh, mother, mother, father has gone out in such a dreadful rage, and he said that when you were better you were to be sent away with that bad man who made you faint; but you won't go, mother dear, will you?"

Over the face of Alice came a curious change, a settling down of a grey horror, that gave her the appearance of one who is dying; but her voice was steady, it was almost cold, as, looking up at Mr. Dawe, she asked, "Josiah, is it true?"

But he, poor man, unable to contradict the rash words of Daisy, said nothing at all, only covered his face with his trembling hands, and groaned at his own impotence to save her from the bitterness of knowing the truth.

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CHAPTER XVI.

Driven Forth.

"WHERE is Mark? I must see him at once," Alice said, her voice with a pitiful break in it now, though her manner was calm enough—too calm, if one might judge by her heaving breast.

She tried to rise to her feet as she spoke, but would have reeled and fallen, if Raymond had not put his arm around her, and gently forced her into an easy chair.

"I will find him, mother, and bring him here to you," he said, with a thrill of indignation in his heart, for, privately, he was calling his father very hard names indeed just then.

"No, your uncle will go," she said, with decision, "for it is not a subject on which a child can speak to a parent, and I cannot bring strife into the household."

"Yes, yes, Alice, I will go," said Mr. Josiah Dawe, though the rueful look on his countenance bespoke all too plainly how little hope he had of success in his mission.

Perhaps she also was not hopeful, for the grey look did not leave her face, as, with clasped hands, she sat silently waiting for the return of the messenger.

Ethel, with kindly forethought, carried Lillith off to the schoolroom, beckoning to Daisy to follow, and Theodore limped after them on his crutches, leaving only Raymond in the room with the stricken woman.

At first she did not speak. But when Mr. Dawe's return was still delayed, and the certainty of Mark's unforgiving anger was borne in upon her, she gathered her courage together to lay some injunctions upon her step-son.

"Raymond, if I have to go away——"

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"But you shall not go away. Father would not be so unjust, so—so cowardly," he retorted, hotly, crossing the room to stand beside her, to lay a hand on the arm of the chair, as if to say in that mute fashion that she had a champion in him who believed in her still, and would fight for her to the death.

"Your father will be quite within his rights if he banishes me his home," she said, with a gentle dignity that ill accorded with her crushed appearance. "Indeed, I hardly see how he could keep me here if he has lost faith in me; but Raymond, you will not add to the bitterness of my lot by bringing about a rupture between yourself and him?"

"I add to your bitterness? Why, mother, I—we—all of us would do anything and everything in our power to make you happy. And why should you go? The other man was dead right enough, or, at least, he made no sign when you married father, and if he has come to life again since, that is his look-out, not yours;" and Raymond stopped short to get the upper hand of his indignation, and to gulp down some unruly emotion, for he was but a young man still, a very young man, and his feelings bade fair to be too much for him at the present crisis.

But she only shook her head drearily, then caught her breath in sudden hope as a footstep sounded in the passage outside. Raymond sprang to open it, but it was only one of the maids who had come to know if the mistress would like her early cup of tea brought in, as it was past the time when she usually had it.

There was a repressed air of excitement about the girl, which showed plainly that some inkling of the trouble had already penetrated to the kitchen. But Raymond speedily sent her away, saying that Mrs. Lester would ring when she was ready for the tea. Then he came back to stand on the hearth-rug in front of her chair.

It was growing grey and cold out of doors, for February

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sunshine is rarely an abiding quantity, but Mr. Josiah Dawe did not return.

A sudden spasm of terrible pain seized upon Alice as a remembrance of Lillith came to her, for, strangely enough, in the absorbing anxiety on her husband's account, she had for the moment entirely forgotten the child.

"Raymond, shall I have to leave Lillith?"

"No, no. Why, mother, you would have nothing left!" he exclaimed, with a start, for he had forgotten her, too.

Aye, poor soul! And she had nothing now. For the child—cherished as she was—counted for little beside the father, and he had turned his back upon her!

A moment of battle with her own heart, an almost imperceptible period of choking back natural longings, and the true spirit of maternal self-sacrifice came to the top.

"It will be better to leave her. If she were an ordinary child it would be different. She will not miss me, but, deprived of the comforts of this home, she might droop and fade."

"But you——" he began.

"Oh, I——. When a woman comes to my plight, Raymond, a little suffering more or less doesn't count. It is like throwing a bucket of water over a man who has been drowned: it can't make him wetter, although it may make a splash," and her quivering lips wavered apart in a smile that was more piteous than tears.

A door was opened somewhere, and a slow, heavy step came along the hall. But it was not Mark, and she clasped her hands the tighter, the better to endure.

Mr. Josiah Dawe opened the door, and came into the room. No need to ask how his ambassage had sped, for failure was written all over him, from his rumpled grey hair down to the soles of his exceedingly muddy boots.

Alice did not even look at him, for disappointment was in his tread, and, besides, if he had succeeded he would not have returned alone.

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After a moment's irresolute pause in the doorway, Mr. Dawe came forward to stand beside Raymond on the rug. "I'm thinking, Alice, you'd best come to me and Keziah for a few days. Mark will have a chance to think things over in that time, and he'll, maybe, see a bit different then," he said, gruffly.

She raised her eyes to look at him. "Won't Mark hear what I have to say? Is he willing to take that man's word before mine?" she asked, in an incredulous tone.

But Mr. Josiah Dawe, angry at heart as he was with his unreasonable, illogical step-brother, was yet willing to make excuses for the sinner behind his back. "He'll see different in a day or two, Alice, and will be as sorry as sorry for the misery he's bringing you now. Mark was always like that, even when he was a little chap, and it's not likely he'd get softer as he grows older."

"But Keziah won't like me to come to Bockley Bent. She will believe, like Mark, that I knew all the time," and Alice swayed to and fro in the sorrow no tears could relieve.

"Yes, she will like you to come. A trying woman Keziah is, when it's only little troubles that are to the fore; but get a sizable burden on hand, and you'll find she has a right good heart down somewhere out of sight," he answered, heartily.

"When shall I have to go away? Won't Mark even come and speak to me?" she asked, a moment later, as if unable to grasp the situation.

"We'll go now, at once. The sooner you are gone, the sooner, maybe, Mark will be seeing things in their right light," he said, with so much urgency in his tone that she began to realize that Mark must be very anxious indeed to get rid of her.

"I must see Ethel." She tried to rouse herself as she spoke to be business-like and practical in her arrangements for abdicating the post she had filled so well; but what a

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miserable failure it all was, and how her trembling limbs shook, refusing to bear her weight, when she rose from her chair, and essayed to go in search of her step-daughter.

"No, no; don't you trouble to move. Raymond will bring Ethel here," said the kindly Mr. Dawe, seeing how feeble she appeared to be.

Ethel came quickly, her face as pale as her step-mother's, and, kneeling down by the chair, laid her head on Alice's lap, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Hush, hush! You must not give way yet. Wait until I am gone," Alice panted, knowing how weak were her own powers of self-control, and dreading lest she should break down also.

Ethel struggled manfully with her tears, choking back her sobs, and forcing herself to be, if not calm, at least sufficiently collected to give heed to what Alice wished to say.

But speech was not easy, and words hard to find. Time was going, too, for Mr. Josiah Dawe had given orders for his horse to be harnessed again, and brought round to the hall-door, although, as a rule, he preferred to mount and depart from the stable-yard.

"I don't know how it was I never could get my courage high enough to tell your father of my first husband's cousin, Philip Desart," she faltered, presently, her breath coming in quick, laboured gasps. "I always had an extreme reluctance to speak of anything connected with my first marriage, when by any means it could be avoided. Philip and Leon were so strangely alike that it was almost impossible to tell them apart, saving for a slight scar on the left cheek of Leon, where he had been wounded by having a knife flung at him. When the accident happened in which Leon died, and I identified his body, the left cheek was so mangled, I could see only a portion of the mark which I deemed to be the scar."

There was an involuntary exclamation from Raymond at

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this statement, and he was telling himself that, rightly or wrongly, it was he who was the indirect cause of all this trouble, since had he not in his fall battered the cheek of the unfortunate man, this mistake of identity would never have occurred.

Alice did not heed the interruption, but went on with the confession that was costing so much in the making, and addressing herself to Raymond and Ethel, although Mr. Josiah Dawe, his face full of pitying concern, stood close at her elbow, a self-constituted protector.

"When it was all over, both the inquest and the funeral, sudden doubt assailed me as to whether I might not have made this very natural mistake, but I could not speak of it to any one. I tried once to tell Susan Godfrey, but was interrupted. Mrs. Wynter was entirely out of the question as a confidante, and so I locked the secret doubt in my own heart. It was the knowledge that your father was beginning to care for me, which made me feel I must make sure, one way or the other; and then I wrote to an old woman, named Sarah Hemmingway, who was the aunt of both Philip and Leon. I knew this woman to be in very straitened circumstances, and so I offered to pay her ten shillings if she would give me certain tidings of her two nephews, but I did not tell her of the accident at Stillwater, and the supposed death of Leon. The answer was long in coming, owing to Mrs. Hemmingway having wrongly addressed the letter, but it arrived at last, just as Mrs. Wynter was beginning to recover from her attack of jaundice."

"Ah, and what was in the letter?" asked Josiah, in a sharp tone of anxiety.

"Mrs. Hemmingway stated that Philip was dead, having expired in her house only five weeks previously, and had been buried in Saint John's cemetery, Greenwich. Leon had started off to discover my own whereabouts some time prior to his cousin's demise, and had not since been

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heard of. In my great relief at knowing that I was really free, I wrote at once to the old woman, sending twice the amount I had promised her, and telling her of Leon's death in Stillwater, and how I had—by the merest chance—happened to see, and to recognize him."

"Where is that letter—the one that came to you?" asked Ethel, lifting her head in sudden hope.

"I destroyed it," replied Alice, sadly; "for it never once occurred to me to save it. Even supposing I had mistaken one man for the other, that letter told me the other was dead also. Thus I was free any way."

"But this Mrs. Hemmingway — can't she be hunted up?" demanded Raymond, who was longing for action of some sort, which might aid in pushing this heavy weight of trouble aside.

"I am afraid not. I wrote to her again, before I was married to your father; but the letter found its way to the dead letter office, and so back to me. This is what I wanted to tell your father, that he might believe I had not wilfully deceived him. He will not come to hear it, however, so I am saying it instead, to you, his children, that you may know if you can take my word—that I am as much sinned against, as sinning."

"Mother, we do know it," burst from the two; so simultaneously, that Mr. Josiah Dawe coughed nervously, to hide an unmanageable sob, which just then got the upper hand in his throat.

Then came the rattle and crunch of wheels on the gravel, as Mr. Dawe's horse and trap was brought round in obedience to his order.

"Come, Alice, are you ready?" he asked gently, yet urgently, desperately anxious to get her clear of the place before Mark should return, because that gentleman, in the madness of what he deemed his righteous anger, had vowed he would have her thrust forth, if she had not gone when he came back.

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"But I have not packed my things," she said, helplessly, and with an appealing look at Ethel.

"You will not need to pack them, mother, dear; we will tell father what you have told us, and he will come to-morrow to bring you back," cried the girl, honestly believing that it would be as she said.

But the faith of Alice was not so strong, and she only shook her head mournfully. Though she had not lived with him so long as they, she knew Mark Lester better than his children did, and the knowledge did not bring hope with it.

Before she went away, Alice tottered into the schoolroom to kiss Lillith good-bye; but the child was lying on the rug, crooning over the cat, and paid no heed to the yearning mother's kisses pressed on to her face and brow.

Oh, the bitterness of her going forth! Raymond lifted her into the little old trap, and Ethel tucked the rugs about her feet, whispering hopes of speedy return between her choking sobs.

But Mr. Josiah Dawe clambered in beside her, cracking his whip, and the fat pony moved off down the gravelled drive, and over the moat-bridge; whilst the February afternoon changed its mood, and began to snow. The tiny white atoms were not colder than her poor heart felt then. Her child did not know her; her husband had driven her out of his home; and the heavens were as brass above her. To whom, then, could she fly for aid?

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CHAPTER XVII.

Mr. Scott's Decision.

MR. SCOTT was by nature the very meekest of men, and a kindly Providence, having in view this phase of his character, had bestowed upon him a bustling, capable wife, who was competent in her own person to rule the house, the children, and her husband into the bargain.

She did rule, too, everywhere outside the four walls of the minister's study, where an opportunity for dominance might arise. But inside that charmed enclosure she had no power or authority at all: for Mr. Scott held very strongly the opinion of Paul, that however useful or necessary women might be in other places, in the church, and in all matters pertaining thereto, it was fitting that they should be kept severely in the background.

So when, about three weeks after the banishment of Alice from the Priors, Mark Lester came over to see the minister, that worthy immediately had him ushered into the study, resolving to do his pastoral duty by this erring sheep of his flock without fear or favour, if only the opportunity presented itself.

Very bowed and changed was Mark, his clustering hair tinged with silver round his temples, and a haggard look of care upon his face, to bear witness to the trouble within. But his pride was not humbled, nor his resentment against Alice lessened, in the weeks since he had cast her forth.

"I have come to ask you to take me back into the church, Mr. Scott," Mark said, when the customary greetings were over between them.

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"Yes," replied the minister, yet with no gladness or congratulation in his tone. In his heart he felt that Mr. Lester was not fit to come back, and by-and-bye he would tell him so, straight out.

"It was a great grief to me to sever myself from church membership, even for a time. But there seemed no help for it; I had sinned openly, and with intention, and I had not repented; therefore, I could not answer to my conscience to maintain the outward attitude of a child of God."

"I can understand that," said Mr. Scott, with decision. "But what about the offence—is it there still, and unrepented?"

"It is there of a certainty; but the repentance for it has been bitter enough," replied Mark, and then plunged into the story of his meeting with Leon Desart, and the lie he had told concerning Alice.

"Yes, Mr. Lester, yes; I see what you mean; but do you know, to my way of thinking, your repentance is worse than the sin itself," Mr. Scott said, with decision, though his hands trembled; for he was not of an aggressive nature, and hated to provoke a semblance of warfare even.

"Sin is sin," retorted Mark, sententiously.

"And repentance may be sin also, if one does not take care," the minister said, in a sorrowful tone. "In this case, too, you seem to be more sorry that the temptation happened to take that special form, than that you succumbed to it when it came."

"I am. I would cheerfully have gone with that unrepented lie on my conscience to the day of my death, if only the object of my sinning had been worthy. But to yield my office of deacon, to cut myself adrift from the church, and then to find my sacrifice abortive, it is that which makes my heart so sore," Mark Lester said haughtily; for the suffering of the past weeks had made the man's pride even more apparent and obtrusive than it was before.

Mr. Scott cleared his throat. His opportunity had come,

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and he meant to use it fearlessly, so that never in the future should that silent monitor within him be able to accuse him of having done less than his duty towards this well-to-do member of his flock.

"If you had come to me with this explanation of your reason for withdrawal, when it took place, I should have said that you had not sinned so greatly, after all. A lie is a lie, I know, and no amount of excuse can convert it into the truth; but God judges motive as well as action, and, seeing your object was to protect the peace of an innocent woman, He, in His infinite long-suffering, would have found a place of repentance for you. But now that you have taken it upon yourself to dictate your time, manner, and place of repentance, I should not be surprised if you fail to find it, even though you seek it prayerfully, and with tears. And are you sure that it is repentance? To me, it is simply and solely a hardening of your heart against the unhappy lady, whose misfortunes we all so greatly deplore."

He had done his duty with a vengeance now. And Mark Lester rose from his chair with a look on his face that might well have cowed a braver man than Mr. Scott.

"Do you mean that you will not bring my name before the church, that you will oppose my re-admission to membership?" the master of the Priors asked, sternly.

But if the minister's heart quailed within him, he was not utterly routed yet, and rallied his courage again for the fray. "Yes, Mr. Lester, I shall oppose your re-admission under present circumstances; I shall oppose it so strongly, that if it comes to a ballot of the members, and there should be a majority in your favour, I shall at once place my own resignation in the hands of the deacons."

"You might find a difficulty in getting another church," Mark insinuated, in an unpleasant tone; he was writhing so much himself under the pastoral condemnation, that it was only human nature to thrust back, when opportunity offered.

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"Probably I should. I might even be without the means of providing the wherewithal to feed and clothe my family. Yet would not my Maker desert me utterly, since my motive was to keep His Church below free from the taint of worldliness and time-serving," Mr. Scott replied, with a noble disregard for consequences, that struck even the man he had condemned so mercilessly; and the better part of Mark's nature responded at once.

"See here, Mr. Scott; you think I am wrong, but on the other hand I do not see you right. Suppose, then, we agree to let matters rest as they are for a time; I will not seek re-admission to the church at present, and hence you will be under no necessity to consider your own resignation."

"As you will," replied the minister, yet without the faintest trace of gratitude, or enthusiasm either. Truth to tell, his opinion of Mark Lester, both as a man and a christian, had fallen so low, that it mattered little to him, then, whether the gentleman chose to pose in the position of a friend or an enemy.

Mark's own estimate of his personal virtues was not especially lofty as he bade the minister good morning. And the manner in which he plied whip and rein to his unfortunate horse, on his way back to Stillwater, was in itself sufficient indication of the exceeding unrest within him.

But his humiliations for that day were not ended yet. At the lower gate of the Priors he chanced upon the rector, who had just returned from a flying visit to the Riviera, where Mrs. Knotley was wintering.

"I have been to see you, Mr. Lester, only to find you were not at home; I am, therefore, the more glad to have met you now," said Mr. Knotley, with such evident purpose in his tone, that Mark Lester winced at the sound of it; truly, he was growing abnormally sensitive in these days, he, who had been wont to pay but little heed to the opinions of other people, when he deemed his path of duty lay before him clear and plain.

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"Yes?" Seeing the unpleasantness had to come, better get it over now, and have done with it, he argued, slipping from his horse, and standing face to face with the rector.

"Do you think that your treatment of Mrs. Lester is such as a christian man should mete out to the woman who has trusted her all to his mercy?"

Mark froze instantly to a haughty inaccessibility. "Mrs. Desart has reason to be grateful to me, that I do not institute proceedings against her for bigamy," he replied, bitterly, resenting the question, as was natural, yet not caring to show his resentment as much as he would have done, had the questioner been other than the rector.

"Tush, man; she was as innocent in the matter as you yourself. More so, indeed, for she would have held back, perhaps refused you, at the time of your proposal to her, but for your own impetuosity. Do you forget that evening in Mrs. Wynter's drawing-room, when you sat behind the screen to hear what the lady had to say about you?" said the other, with a smile.

Did he forget anything of aught connected with that brief, blissful courtship, and the happy married life which followed? It seemed to him then, as he stood in his anger facing the rector, that every small detail, even, of that period of joy, was being burnt into his brain with the white-hot iron of remembrance. He might drive his wife forth, declaring in his anger that she was a fraud, a cheat, an impostor; he might disown her, refusing even to hear her justification; might, in fact, go so far as to threaten her with legal proceedings for bigamy; yet, in spite of all this, he could not forget how once he had loved her, and trusted her, and the memory of it was as the perfume of dead violets in his heart—sweet, sad, and penetrating.

But for all the threat and harass of his inward pain, he was not disposed to yield one iota from the course he had carved out for himself; and the pleading and protestations of her friends, and of his, served but to harden his heart

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against her—the woman who had been his wife, and who was the mother of Lillith.

"I used no underhand methods in my wooing, Mr. Knotley. And my present conduct is amply justified by the circumstances which have led to it," he answered, severe, hard, implacable as ever, a man of granite.

"I can't believe that any man is justified in turning his wife out of doors, unless, indeed, she was an immoral person, and even then it would be questionable," retorted the rector, grimly.

"What! would you, a clergyman, have me live in a state of open sin, with a woman who is another man's wife?" exclaimed Mark Lester, aghast at what he chose to call the low standard of Mr. Knotley's morals.

"No, I would not. I don't consider she is the wife of the other man, whatever opinion the law may hold to the contrary. And I wouldn't have given her up to forty husbands, if they had risen from their graves in a body to lay claim to her."

"She has not gone back to the other man; she is at my step-brother's, at Bockley Bent," snapped Mark, with a sudden fire in his eyes.

Being a shrewd man, this blaze of passion was not lost on the rector, who was quick to put it down to its right source. Mr. Lester was as much in love with his wife as ever, perhaps more so; and it was the very fierceness of his love for her which had set up the wild tempest of jealousy and doubt in his heart.

But the discovery did not tend to make the rector more tolerant of the conduct of his churchwarden and friend, serving rather to strengthen his determination not to spare him in any way. "It is no thanks to you, Mr. Lester, that she did not go back to her first husband, if, indeed, he is her husband, which, I must confess, I greatly doubt. A less noble woman would have gone, if only to spite you."

Mark's face turned fiery red at this thrust. He was

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having a very bad morning of it between Mr. Scott and the rector; but even though he might have snubbed his own minister, it was of no use to attempt that kind of thing with Mr. Knotley, and he was compelled to fall back upon an attitude of sullen defiance. "I was well within my rights in bidding her go, and I have written to my brother since, offering her a maintenance."

"Would she take it?"

"No," replied Mark, shortly, wincing visibly at this mode of cross-examination.

"I thought not. That sort of woman would prefer rather to die in a ditch than accept charity at the hand of a man who would not believe in her."

Mark turned at bay now. Despite the difference in their religious beliefs, the rector was about the closest friend he had, and to have incurred his condemnation was a bitterness he had not counted upon. "I do not know why you and all the rest of the world should join hands against me, because I have acted up to my duty as I see it. And I think you might remember that I have not been without my share of suffering in the matter, nor humiliation either. Take this morning, for instance. I have just been over to Clorpe to ask Mr. Scott to re-admit me to membership. I did not ask to be made a deacon, mind—only to be taken into the church, as any ordinary person might be. And what kind of a reception do you suppose I got?"

"I cannot tell," replied the rector, shaking his head, yet with a twinkle in his eye. He knew Mr. Scott slightly, and guessed that underneath that meek exterior the little nonconformist shepherd hid a strong will, and an uncompromising sense of duty for all questions of creed and christianity.

"He plainly told me that I was not fit to go back, that he would not have me at any price, and I the staunchest supporter, and the most liberal giver, the place has had these many years past," retorted Mark, bitterly, all the

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more sore on the subject because of that same liberality of his, which had caused him to drop his shillings and half-crowns into the collection-plate, where less zealous—or, maybe, less wealthy—folk put pennies, or the more aspiring, if more diminutive, threepenny-bit.

"He did, did he? Well, at the least, it was an unprejudiced opinion, seeing how much he risked in offending you," rejoined Mr. Knotley, quietly.

"I could ruin him if I chose," said Mark, with that air of swagger which did occasionally crop up in his manner, to the detriment of his manliness.

"Just so; all the more reason why you should carefully guard his interests," the rector said, curtly. It always irritated him when Mark took that tone. A thorough gentleman himself, snobbishness in others was as a vision of the cloven hoof, causing him to instantly draw off.

"I am not so sure of that," the master of the Priors answered, gruffly. How intensely mortifying all this condemnation was to him, no one but himself could possibly know, or how hurting to his self-esteem, either.

"I am," retorted the rector, moving off; then he came back a step to lay his hand on his neighbour's arm, saying earnestly, "And, my friend, remember this: *Vox populi* is sometimes *vox Dei;* therefore, be careful how you set aside or disregard it, lest haply a heavier judgment descend upon you."

A heavier judgment! As he walked his horse up the slope, and over the moat bridge, Mark Lester told himself bitterly, that nowhere under God's heaven could there have been found for him a trouble so burdensome, a discipline so severe.

Ah, foolish man, and ignorant that he was, not to know that the harvest to be reaped from his present sowing might exceed in humiliation all that had come before.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

A Stricken Soul.

THE house at Bockley Bent stood on high ground, considerably removed from the orchards, barns, and piggeries of the homestead. A queer, weather-beaten little house it was, unattractive both outside and in; but it was Josiah Dawe's own property, and he saw no lack in it, nor felt any of its very palpable inconveniences, and this being so, it was not the business of any one else to criticize its deficiencies, either.

When Josiah Dawe drove Alice to Bockley Bent on that February evening when her husband thrust her forth, Miss Keziah received her with open arms, amply justifying her brother's declaration concerning her.

"Turned you out, did he? More shame to him, then; but there's no reasoning with our Mark when he once gets an idea in his head. He was just like that about marrying you. He would do it, in spite of everything I could say to the contrary."

Alice, who had been sitting huddled up in the chair before the fire in which Josiah had placed her, roused at this to ask in surprise, "Why should you have objected to Mark marrying me? I had done you no harm, and we—we loved each other." There was a pitiful break in her tone as she spoke, for the love—one side of it, at least—was terribly under eclipse now.

"I can't explain why I so disliked it, but the idea was altogether repugnant to me. I'd got the feeling that the marriage would not work out well, and I couldn't get past it," Keziah answered, as she hospitably piled more coals on

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the fire, and fussed about the comfort of her unexpected visitor.

Alice shivered. So chill and cold was her heart, that nothing could warm her, though Miss Keziah made a fire so big it threatened to set the chimney ablaze, and plied her with hot drinks and warm shawls. A stricken soul was she, mutely praying that kind death might speedily end her pain, and set her spirit free from the fierce agony of her suffering.

The brother and sister did what they could for her, their kindly sympathy raising a dumb gratitude in her heart, though even that was not unmixed with wonder that they had not turned against her, like her husband.

Miss Keziah put her to bed as if she had been a baby, and never left her all the livelong night, whilst the storm wind howled round the exposed little house, and the snow-flakes piled themselves in drifts on the window-sills.

There was no sleep for any one at Bockley Bent that night, saving, indeed, the red-cheeked maiden who did the housework, and took this opportunity to oversleep herself, as if to use up the chances of repose that were being wasted in such a prodigal fashion by the others.

"He'll come for you to-morrow," Josiah had whispered encouragingly to Alice, when he brought her to Bockley Bent; and though at heart she did not believe that her husband's anger would soften towards her like that, she clung to the idea in spite of herself, and watched the slow revolutions of the clock with a yearning pain that was almost too bitter to be borne.

From the sitting-room window it was possible to see for half-a-mile, or more, along the road by which Mark would have to come—if he came—and, planting herself by that window, Alice steadily held that streak of road in view.

He did not come, however, and as evening drew on, her half-formed hope yielded to despair. Then a figure on horseback showed faintly against the white road, and her

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heart gave a great bound. It was Mark at last, was her first thought; but no, if he had come to take her home, he would not have made the journey on horseback, and disappointment settled down upon her once more, as she saw that it was not her husband, but Raymond, who was approaching, mounted on the grey colt.

And then a great fit of shivering came over her, so that she could not even walk across the room to meet her step-son when he entered.

"Your father?" she gasped, when Raymond came to her, standing by her chair, and looking down at her with eyes full of kindly pity and concern.

But he only shook his head slightly, an ominous hardness gathering round his mouth. "He's all right," he said, impatiently. "Lillith is all right, too. Ethel says she shall bring her over to see you, as soon as the weather is warm enough to take her out."

A smothered groan rose to Alice's lips, but was resolutely choked back. It was not loyal to her husband to let his children see how she suffered at the prospect of exile, yet all hope died out of her life at that moment. If her husband would not take her back, then, indeed, there was no use in living. Her child did not need her—hardly knew her, in fact—and she was of no importance to anyone else.

Raymond had turned away to talk to his aunt, guessing something of the pain his words must have given, and anxious to spare the poor sufferer where he could.

Darker and darker grew the world outside. The red-cheeked maid brought in the tray for tea, setting the cups and plates on the table with a considerable amount of noise and bustle, whilst Miss Keziah brought out a plate of muffins, and began toasting them, telling Raymond that he must hold one to the fire, whilst she held another, and so between them the work of toasting would be quickly done.

He took the toasting-fork she handed to him, and endeavoured to brown his muffin in the very best style.

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But a gasping sigh arrested his attention, and, turning his head, he saw Alice lying back in a swoon, in her chair. Down in the ashes went the muffin, crash on the fender fell the toasting fork, provoking a sharp remonstrance from Miss Keziah for his clumsiness, which was cut short, however, when she saw what it was that had caused him to spring so hastily across to that chair by the window.

It was a long time before consciousness returned to Alice; so long, that Miss Keziah sent Raymond off hurriedly for a doctor, whilst Josiah hovered round in restless misery, suggesting burnt feathers, smelling salts, and other remedies, many and various, until Miss Keziah, between anxiety and vexation, was ready to wish that she had sent him for the doctor, instead of her nephew.

Alice had come back to consciousness with a fluttering sigh and choking sobs, just before the doctor came in; but she was so very weak and prostrate, that Miss Keziah manifested considerable alarm, and even the doctor looked grave.

Grief, however, is a very slow poison, albeit a painful one. As the days went on, Alice did not die; did not even keep her bed, but crept about the house with a sad, white face, and such an air of desolation, that the red-cheeked maid grew quite melancholy at the sight, and cried about her tasks so constantly, that her eyes grew as red as her cheeks.

Alice shed no tears; indeed, she seemed to have none to shed, and the slow days crawled on, in a black monotony of pain.

Then came Mark's letter; not written to her, but to Mr. Josiah Dawe, offering a small income to be paid weekly, monthly, or quarterly, as *Mrs. Desart* should prefer.

That letter came on Alice like a tonic, that should whip her flagging energies into fuller life again. "Tell him," she cried, her pale face crimson now with a passion of resentment, "that I will starve, and die under a hedge, or

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in a ditch, before I will take one penny from a man who will not even give me a chance to justify myself when I am traduced."

And Josiah, for all that he was a man of peace, and hated rows, whether family or otherwise, wrote down the message exactly as she had spoken it, and sent it without a word of comment to Mark, whose sensations were not of the pleasantest when he read what his step-brother had written.

Alice threw aside her invalid ways after that; and though her face was not less sad, nor her aspect less desolate, her step became brisker, and she seemed possessed of a perfectly insatiable desire for work of any sort or kind, provided it only had a prospect of distraction in it. And the red-cheeked maid, amazed at the change which brought such a lightening of her own hard work, left off weeping, and stood admiringly at ease; whilst Alice washed dishes, dusted rooms, and did this, that, and the other, with feverish zeal and energy.

Once—it was about a fortnight after her coming to Bockley Bent—Alice opened the question of the desirability of her taking a situation, and going out into the world to fend for herself again; but neither brother or sister would hear of it, both of them hotly protesting that it was the worst possible thing she could do, to leave her present shelter at such a juncture.

"But I am a burden on you," she urged, two slow tears gathering under her eyelids, and rolling down her cheeks. She did not weep over her own sorrows—they were too heavy—but this unwavering kindness of her husband's kin was potent enough to wring out a few salt drops from her scanty store of tears.

"No, my dear, you're not; and if you were, it would still be our duty and our pleasure to keep you here," said Josiah, earnestly. "People's tongues will wag when they can get a chance; be it for good or evil, matters little, if

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only they can get their fill o' talk. But it's little they'll be able to say against you, or your good name, all the time you live with your husband's kin."

"They can spend their breath talking about Mark instead. A little criticism may be wholesome for him just now," put in Miss Keziah, with a vicious pull at her knitting, which broke the wool and dragged four or five stitches off the needles, taking her nearly half-an-hour to get it straight again.

"Please don't," pleaded Alice. How much it hurt her to hear her husband reviled no one could guess, and the sting of it lay in the fact that she could not defend him.

"I wonder what has become of that man who made the mischief," Miss Keziah burst out presently, as she wrestled with the tangle of her knitting, and lost her temper over it.

Alice winced, and a red flush crept into her pale cheeks, that already had lost much of their roundness. To hear Leon's name mentioned, always sent her into a perspiration; it was such a terrible situation to find herself with two husbands, and she had always the frightened sensation of one who is watched, followed, or haunted, by an evil presence, from which there is no escape.

"I don't know where he is, but I know where he isn't, and where it wouldn't be special healthy for him to venture," retorted Josiah, with a belligerent tightening of his clenched fist, that caused the old dog, sleeping peacefully at his feet, to lift its head and growl.

"Quiet, Shep, quiet; there's nothing to make a noise about," admonished Miss Keziah, who did not approve of the dog's presence in the sitting-room at all, but had to endure it, since Josiah would have it so.

"Alice, I wish we could find that Mrs. Hemmingway," he said, after a pause, during which Shep had gone to sleep again, and Miss Keziah's knitting had been reduced to working order once more.

"So do I. But I fear she is dead," Alice replied, with a sigh.

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"I think I shall take a run down to Greenwich, and have a look about; it can't do any harm, and it might lead to something," he said, vaguely.

"I've no doubt it would lead to something; it would lead to your losing all the money you'd got about you, and a deal more, too, very likely. You think you are a wise man, Josiah Dawe, but you are not half wise enough, or half sharp enough either, to start on a quest like that; people would see you coming, and take your measure, a mile away," Miss Keziah said, contemptuously, clicking her knitting needles at a great rate, since she had to work her fastest now to make up for lost time.

Perhaps the opinion of Alice coincided with Miss Keziah's, but her manner of expressing it was different, and she only said, quietly, "I am very much afraid it is of no use for you, or any other person, to go in search of her; most likely her object in leaving Greenwich was to escape the surveillance of the police, and she would be careful to cover the traces of her going."

Josiah shook his head, but whether in disapproval of Mrs. Hemmingway's manner of life, or in dissent from the opinions expressed by Alice and his sister, did not transpire, for he said nothing further about the matter, nor did they mention it, either.

But the next day he had the fat pony harnessed to the basket chaise, and informed Miss Keziah that he was going to Clorpe on business.

"You are not going on to the Priors?" she demanded, suspiciously, a little doubtful concerning the errand, for Josiah wore the aspect of a culprit who seeks to evade detection, and Miss Keziah always prided herself upon her shrewdness.

"No; I don't say that I wouldn't go there if Mark was ill, or in trouble, but I shouldn't set foot in his house on any other count—not till he treats his wife better, that is," he replied, with a shuffling desire to be gone.

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"What is your business in Clorpe?" she demanded, suspicious still.

"They say that young Palmer has got some seed barley for sale, cheap, and we shall want some for Bockley Ridge," he said, nervously.

"Very likely; that Ridge takes no end of seed. I only wish the harvests were anywhere near the proportions of the sowings," she retorted, with a sigh, and Josiah made his escape, hugely relieved at being let off so lightly.

He had told the truth in saying he wanted to see Hubert Palmer about the barley; but that was, after all, only the ostensible reason of his going, and his real purpose in his journey was about as far removed from barley, whether seed or otherwise, as it well could be, and the thought of his deception was a heavy burden on his shoulders all the way to Clorpe.

Hubert Palmer, a broad-shouldered young athlete of very determined aspect, was busily employed helping his men to winnow and measure the barley in question, and that part of Mr. Dawe's errand was soon disposed of; then he drew the young man aside. "Got a minute or two to spare, Hubert? I've a private matter I want your opinion upon."

"Yes, Mr. Dawe, I can give you half-an-hour if you like; come indoors to the fire, it is cold out here," the young man said, heartily.

"No, I won't go in, thank you all the same," replied the other. "I want a word very much on the quiet, don't you see, with no women folks round to catch up what you've got to say."

Greatly mystified by this declared desire for secrecy, Hubert led the way to the mixing-house, at the end of the long row of cattle sheds; that place was always deserted at this hour, and hence they would be quite safe from interruption from other people.

"Been to the Priors lately?" asked Mr. Josiah Dawe,

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with a friendly wink, when they reached the safe covert of the mixing-house, and were free from other ears.

"I was there last night," replied Hubert, with a sudden lengthening of his visage, and a darkening of his brow that was almost a scowl.

"Ah!" There was a world of sympathy in Mr. Dawe's monosyllabic ejaculation, for well he knew the cause of the cloud on the young man's brow.

"It is hard that one man should have the power to make so many innocent people miserable," Hubert burst out, hotly; all the morning he had been holding himself sternly in check, but that sympathetic murmur from Mr. Josiah Dawe had the effect of making his indignation boil over, as, indeed, it was intended to do.

"It's the way of the world," retorted the middle-aged philosopher, with a sigh.

"It is a very unjust way," said Hubert. "Here is Mr. Lester taking the word of a low, thieving tramp, and turning his wife out of doors; and then, when I want Ethel to marry me, she says she can't, because of her promise to Mrs. Lester to take care of Lillith!"

"Ah! Ethel won't leave the child?"

"No; she told me straight out that if I couldn't wait for her, I must get a wife from somewhere else," Hubert went on, with an air of great disgust.

"And are you going to look somewhere else for a wife?" demanded Mr. Dawe, with a low chuckle of intense enjoyment; for it was a well-known fact that Hubert Palmer had been as the shadow of Ethel, ever since she emerged from the schoolroom, and the bare supposition of his giving her up was amusing to the old widower-uncle, who had looked on at the development of the love story from its very beginning.

"What do you take me for?" asked the young man, in an offended tone. "I would cheerfully wait for Ethel all my life, if there was any reason in the waiting that I can

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see. But just why we are to be made wretched, because Mr. Lester has taken a whim into his head, is more than I can understand."

"Look here, it's this very business that has brought me over here this morning," said Mr. Dawe, clutching hold of the young man's jacket, and speaking in a hurried, earnest manner. "There's an old woman to be hunted up, the only person living—except the wretch who has done the mischief—that can help Mrs. Lester now."

"You mean Mrs. Hemmingway?" asked young Hubert, quickly.

"The same. She's got to be hunted up, and made to tell the truth about the letter she wrote to my poor sister-in-law; it must be a written statement, and signed by reliable witnesses, you understand," he said, shaking his head portentously, as if to emphasize the gravity of the situation.

But it was plainly evident, by the way he stared at Mr. Dawe, that Hubert Palmer did not understand, or at least that he did not recognize his own responsibility in the matter.

"Don't you see that the only way to find the woman, is to go and look for her? I'd go myself, willingly enough, only Keziah says folks would see me coming, and would just set to work to cheat me and lead me astray. And I daresay she's right, for I am a bit old-fashioned, as I know myself; so if it ain't me, it must be you, seeing you've an equal stake in the concern."

"You mean that you want me to go and hunt this woman up?" asked Hubert, beginning to see daylight at last.

"That's my meaning. I'll pay you, understand. And you're not to spare any reasonable expense, either," the other went on, nodding his head a great many times, and looking very sagacious indeed.

"But, Mr. Dawe ——" began the young man, colouring in an embarrassed fashion; for the old farmer of Bockley

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Bent was supposed to be in very straitened circumstances, and a quest of this kind might involve considerable expenditure of ready money, in order to follow it to a successful issue.

"I've brought fifty pounds in gold with me this morning, and there's fifty more ready for you when that's gone, if you'll just send me a postcard with 'Potatoes run short' written upon it; Keziah won't know what you mean then, and it isn't advisable to always let your women folks know what you are about, I find," said Mr. Josiah Dawe, wagging his head again, as he drew a canvas bag from the pocket of his nether garments, and shook it suggestively in the young man's face.

"And you don't want me to tell Ethel, either?" asked the young, with a dubious look.

"Don't tell any one. Least said, soonest mended, is a very good motto for a time like this. If we fail, there will be no one to cry, 'I told you so;' and if you find the party, and make her tell the truth, why, it will be soon enough to talk about it then."

"Very well. And I'll start to-day; Sam can look after things for a week or two, and if I go off without seeing Ethel, there won't be any danger of my saying anything to her about it," the young man said with a laugh, by no means ill-pleased at the prospect of the journey, and the errand at the end of it.

Some time longer they talked together, and then Josiah Dawe clambered into his little old chaise again, and whipped up his fat old pony for the return journey, whilst Hubert Palmer, with the canvas bag transferred to his keeping, began his preparations for starting on his search.

Miss Keziah was a little curious to know if anything besides barley had been discussed in her brother's interview with young Palmer; but he parried her questions with so much adroitness, that she became surprised at her own curiosity upon a subject so barren.

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CHAPTER XIX.

LILLITH'S DELIGHT.

WHEN the weather broke, and the days grew warmer, there came a bitter-sweet experience to Alice, which broke down what little fortitude the weeks of deprivation had taught her.

Ethel brought Lillith to Bockley Bent to see her mother.

No day had been named for their coming, and no one was looking for them. Miss Keziah had taken down the crimson rep hangings of the big four-post bed in her own room, and was mending them, with Alice to help her, when the red-cheeked maid put her head into the room, and said, breathlessly, "Please, ma'am, the young ladies from the Priors is come."

Alice sprang up with a cry, and casting the gloomy crimson stuff in a heap on the floor, rushed downstairs, followed no less eagerly, although at a slower pace, by Miss Keziah.

Ethel stood in the hall below, and Lillith stood beside her with a calm serenity of expression that betrayed no lack in her life, no mother-sickness such as an ordinary child might have known, and no interest either in the strange surroundings in which she found herself.

But the quick step of Alice upon the stairs arrested her attention, and she turned to see her long-absent mother close beside her. Then a wonderful change came over the small, sweet face. Its calm was broken by a quick, leaping smile of joyful intelligence, and, with a glad, inarticulate cry, she held out her arms to be taken.

Miss Keziah and Ethel turned away with one accord, and

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the red-cheeked maid was so overcome by the spectacle of the meeting between mother and child, that she rushed away to the dairy, and sat down upon the churn to have a good cry, whilst the potatoes boiled themselves to soup on the kitchen fire, and the meat pie in the oven was burned as black as a cinder.

Putting her arms round Lillith, Alice carried her away upstairs to her own chamber, there to weep over her, to rejoice over her, and be happy and sorrowful by turns.

But there was no sadness in Lillith's heart. She sang in her happiest crooning fashion, laughed in the serene manner with which she was wont to display her joy, and even ventured on what was very rare with her, and that was, articulate speech.

There was no reason—outside her own refusal to do it—why she should not have talked long ago. But she simply would not, and so they had let her alone.

This morning, however, as she sat in her mother's arms in the sunshiny bedroom at Bockley Bent, a different mood came upon her, and when she had sung and laughed to her heart's content, she suddenly put up a hand to stroke Alice's face, saying, in a queer, halting tone, "Muvver, muvver!"

For a brief moment the listener's senses seemed to reel at this unexpected, unhoped-for recognition; then, the joy of it steadying her nerves, Alice bent down over the little one, kissing her tenderly, and murmuring, "Yes, darling, Lillith's mother."

Who shall describe the happiness of her heart as she sat with her child in her arms, and watched the late, slow dawn of its intelligence? And if that was beyond the power of pen to depict, who shall attempt the yet more difficult task of painting the agony of the parting when it came?

Lillith had dropped to sleep, and Alice, despite her longing for one more look into the eyes of her child, was thankful to have it so, grateful, even in her own pain, that

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the little maiden should be spared her share of the suffering.

But when Lillith was transferred from the arms of her mother to those of Ethel, she stirred in her sleep, murmuring happily, "Muvver, muvver."

No one spoke after that. Oliver, who was driving, touched his hat "to the missus," and whipped up his horse, whilst a perfect rain of tears fell unchecked down Miss Keziah's hard face, as she watched them drive away.

But Alice did not weep. Some grief is too deep for tears, and hers was of that kind. Fleeing to the refuge of her chamber, she shut herself up there to battle with her misery as best she might.

In all the time since she had been thrust out from her home, she had never once opened her lips in supplication. In her wretchedness she was dumb, and the repressed misery of her sorrow rankled and festered like a sore that has no outlet.

But this day, after Lillith, in her halting, uncertain utterances, had whispered, "Muvver, muvver," something seemed to have given way in her own heart; some barrier was removed, some impediment taken away, and lifting imploring hands towards heaven, she pleaded, "Father, Thou hast sent the pain, give me strength to endure it."

And in the selfsame hour her prayer was heard, and answered.

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CHAPTER XX.

A Troublesome Casual.

IT was board-day at the Rushton workhouse, and already several gigs, dog-carts, bicycles, saddle-horses, and other means of conveyance, were gathered in the wide courtyard, within the entrance gates, and were being dealt with as fast as the exigencies of the situation permitted. Of the two old men told off for this duty, one was lame, and the other so infirm that his movements scarcely rivalled those of the historic tortoise, whose chronicled race with the hare secured for it a world-wide fame.

It was the end of April, and May-day was in sight, but anything more unlike May-day weather could scarcely be imagined. A cold, biting wind swept over the hills, and rushed with a shrieking blast through the valleys, a hard frost enchained the ground, whilst ever and anon a shower of dancing snowflakes fell, to show that hoary winter had not yet relaxed his grasp on the shivering, shrinking world.

Inside the workhouse it was warm enough; the big tortoise stove in the hall was sending out a cheery glow, for the benefit of such poor applicants for out-relief as had that day come to plead their own cause before the assembled guardians of the poor. Upstairs, in the room above, where the guardians sat, it was even warmer, and the portly, red-faced farmers gathered about the wide grate, with its sunny bank of blazing coals, were talking of the severe weather, the damage it would work on the young lambs, and the tender shoots of Lent-sown corn, shaking their wiseacre heads, and comparing notes as to similar experiences in past years.

Mark Lester was among them, more silent and haughty than of yore, and with heavy care written on his countenance. But he was not just then discussing agriculture

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with his neighbours, but listening to the excited account of a fellow-guardian, a fussy little man with an inquisitive nose, anent a row that had taken place in the casual ward two nights previously, wherein one member of the tramping fraternity had been set upon by another, and in the fight which ensued, had been so battered and wounded that his life was despaired of.

"The system is wrong, Mr. Lester, *dee*-cidedly wrong," said the little man, with a long-drawn nasal inflection of the first syllable, meant to be very effective.

"The tramp was wrong, doubtless," rejoined Mark, in an uninterested tone. His own troubles were pressing so heavily at this particular time, that he had but scant sympathy for the woes or tribulations of other people, whether paupers or otherwise.

"My dear sir, when did you ever know a casual other than wrong?" jerked out the little man, in surprised query. He was one of those unfortunate people who are born with the belief that they have a mission in the world, and, without any special study of their own fitness for the position, seize upon a vocation and hold to it, oblivious of the discomfort thereby wrought upon the folk with whom they may be brought into contact. This individual had bestrode the poor-law as the hobby-horse most fitted for the display of his energies, and week in, week out, he talked, he thought, and he even dreamed of nothing else than the abuses of that much-discussed, yet really admirable form of administration.

In the board-room he was avoided like an infected person; the chairman, vice-chairman, and everyone else possessing the veriest rag of authority, joined forces in the endeavour to repress his most loquacious ubiquity. They were not very successful, however, for Mr. Symes regarded them all as part and parcel of the system, and railled at them with infinite zest and vigour.

Many and various had been the expedients used by his

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co-guardians to get him dropped from his seat on the board, but these were without exception futile; the poor people of the district voted him in, proudly returning him at the top of the poll, and adored him without one dissentient voice, for was he not for ever railing at that which they all abhorred—hence, was he not their champion and friend?

Mr. Symes had chosen to inflict himself upon Mark, because he could get no one else to lend an ear to his eloquence, and Mark, not caring to meet the questioning of his neighbours that morning, allowed himself to be victimized by the loquacious Mr. Symes, without even a feeble effort at self-defence.

"And where is the injured man now?" he enquired, when the Don Quixote of the Rushton paupers had been compelled to pause for want of breath.

"In the infirmary ward; I have just been to see him," gasped Mr. Symes, who still panted heavily. "It is the only sound spot in the whole rotten system, my dear sir, that they give the doctor absolute authority within the walls of the workhouse. It was he, Dr. Benthall, who ordered the removal of the poor victim to the comfort of a bed in the infirmary, and it was he who insisted upon his having proper nourishment, too. Ah, my dear sir, the thick-heads who framed our poor laws have laid up some weighty judgments for themselves in the world to come, or I am greatly mistaken as to the intentions of the Creator. But the case will be brought before the board this morning, and then I shall ask some questions!"

A most unnecessary declaration that, seeing that he always did ask questions upon any and every subject that had to be discussed, and this morning he simply bristled with queries, as a porcupine bristles with quills.

The clerk commenced to read the minutes, and with much clattering and shuffling of chairs and feet, the company seated themselves round the table for the transaction of the business of the morning. There were no ladies on

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the Rushton board, although two had sat on the board at Ford for this year past; they were highly conservative at Rushton, and did not believe in allowing women to get the upper hand, or to usurp positions of authority.

There were the usual cases of poverty, deserving and undeserving, to be dealt with; there was also the usual amount of argument over each case that came up for judgment. But in all of this Mark Lester took little or no part, though Mr. Symes let no opportunity pass of planting his many and tiresome queries.

Mark was thinking of the new trouble and perplexity that had come to harass his days, and to fill his nights with care. Lillith was pining—pining for the mother whom she had never seemed to need, or to specially care for, until the day when Ethel took her over to Bockley Bent to cheer the heart of the poor exile sheltering there. Since that time, the child's one plaint had been "Muvver, muvver," and she had drooped and faded like a wilted flower, until they at last felt compelled to call the doctor in. The local practitioner declared the case beyond him, and asked that Dr. Allandale should be called in for consultation.

To this Mark Lester willingly acceded, for of all his children Lillith was by far the most dear; her mental disability was in itself a cause sufficient for this, and no one of his other children would have dreamed of resenting a state of things that seemed to them wholly natural.

When Dr. Allandale came, he brought with him the asylum doctor, who had already manifested so much interest in the peculiar mental lack of Mr. Lester's youngest born. It was yesterday that the visit had been paid, and after a very short discussion, the two had told the master of the Priors that the only thing which ailed the child was the longing for her mother, which longing must speedily be satisfied, lest worse should ensue.

Mark had shut his teeth, and bowed stiffly over the verdict of the learned ones. Perhaps deep down in his

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heart he was suffering from the very same pain as that which caused the fading of Lillith; perhaps he was beginning to think his belief in his wife's guilt had been, to say the least, rather premature. But he was not going to admit either the pain or the doubt—his pride would not permit that—so he just heard what the doctors had to say in silence, and debated with himself afterwards concerning the best course to be pursued.

He was debating still, as he sat in his place at the board-room table, apparently giving his whole attention to the business being transacted there, in reality paying no heed to it at all.

"A shameful state of things, I call it, and if the poor fellow dies, I hope the coroner's jury will return a verdict of murder against the workhouse authorities for their wilful negligence," stormed Mr. Symes, jumping up and pushing back his chair with a clatter.

Mark looked up. Murder was an ugly word, and he wondered what had caused its utterance; but just at first he could get no clue to the business, so great was the hubbub caused by the stormy declaration of the belligerent Mr. Symes.

Everyone talked at once, many of them shouting at the top of their voices, and the commotion was indescribable. Bang, bang, bang, went the wooden hammer of the chairman upon the table, by way of enforcing quiet; but he might have spared himself the trouble, since no one heeded it in the least, and when he left off knocking, and took to shouting instead, the change did but add but one more note to the confusion that already raged so wildly all around him.

Mr. Symes was in his element. How much he enjoyed these stormy scenes, wherein his hand was against every man's, and every man's hand against him, no one but himself could possibly know. Yet there he stood, his foot on the chair, his inquisitive nose tilted high in the air, ranting away like the agitator that he was, calling his neighbours hard names, whilst they, in their turn, pelted him with

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opprobrious epithets, which he repelled with scorn, and taunted them the more.

They quieted down after a time, being all of them more or less out of breath from their severe vocal exertions, and then Mark Lester, who all this while had been unable to make head or tail of the matter which had caused the confusion, asked the gentleman sitting next to him what it was they were all quarrelling about so violently.

This gentleman, who was a clergyman from a rural parish, surveyed him with no little surprise depicted on his face. "Why, Mr. Lester, have you been to sleep this morning?" he demanded, with a smile.

"I have certainly not been listening," Mark admitted, candidly enough, flushing a little at the mention of his abstraction, for he was abnormally sensitive on the question of his domestic difficulties just now.

"They have been quarrelling over the height of the wall which separates the male casual yard from the female," explained his informant, courteously. Remote though his parish was from Stillwater, it was not so far away but that rumours of Stillwater gossip could penetrate to it, and he knew something, and guessed more, of the cause of the other's inattention.

"Mr. Symes said it would be murder. Whose murder?" asked Mark. The wrangle had broken out afresh in the neighbourhood of the chairman's seat, and the clerk was searching in his books for a legal opinion on the disputed point, which should be conclusive in settling the tempest, and restoring order to the assembly.

"Mr. Symes speaks strongly. A coroner's jury might call it manslaughter, but I am not sure they would even do that, unless they had been indiscreet enough to choose Mr. Symes for their foreman," replied the other, with a disapproving shake of his head in the direction of the little orator, who was just then pounding away on the rights of the submerged tenth, those impotent ones for whom no

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helper had arisen. "You remember Mr. Symes declared for the raising of that wall last autumn, when the matter came up for discussion, and how his motion was lost by a majority of one. It seems we should have been wiser to have borne the trifling expense of raising, if, by so doing, the present catastrophe might have been avoided. In this case, it appears that a man, weak in health, had taken shelter for the night in the casual ward, chiefly because he was being shadowed by a woman who had a grudge against him, and was seeking to wreak a summary vengeance upon him. The woman did not know the man had come to the workhouse, but took shelter there herself for the night, intending to renew her quest in the morning. But being tall, and, in consequence, able to look over the wall, she quickly espied her victim crossing the men's yard. What followed next is still matter for conjecture, but the results were manifest enough; she got into the men's yard, whether over the wall or by the gate, which might for the moment have been left unfastened, we do not know, and falling upon her victim, who was too feeble to defend himself, had pretty well beaten the life out of him before a rescue could be effected."

"And Mr. Symes calls that murder on the part of the authorities?" asked Mark Lester, with a faint, incredulous smile. He had heard Mr. Symes rave often enough, but this was going one step further still, and was lunacy complete, and nothing short of it.

"He says it will be murder, if Philip Desart dies," corrected the clergyman.

"What?" shouted Mark, his voice a shriek almost, as he sprang up in his place, and glared down at his astonished neighbour. "What did you say the man's name was?"

"Philip Desart—do you know him?" But Mark's raised tone had already attracted attention, and people were turning round to see what was the matter, even the truculent Mr. Symes stopping short in the middle of a scathing sentence, to discover what fresh interest had arisen.

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CHAPTER XXI.

A Futile Quest.

ONE of the darkest, dirtiest, narrowest streets of the poorest part of Greenwich; and in an upper room of the corner house, Hubert Palmer was sitting.

His head was resting on his folded arms, which in their turn rested upon the table, and his whole attitude bespoke extreme weariness, or extreme dejection, perhaps a mixture of both.

For days and weeks past he had been on search for some clue which might lead to the discovery of Mrs. Hemmingway; he had spent weary hours lounging in shabby clothes at the places where he was most likely to learn something concerning her, and, indeed, so far as hearsay went, he might be said to be very well acquainted with her, knowing most of her vagaries and eccentricities, and able to describe her person with quite commendable correctness. But the woman herself he had never beheld, and it was this which was bringing his failure home to him, so weary was he with a day of lounging against doorposts, listening to unprofitable conversation, and tired, too, with the enforced idleness, which to a man of his calibre was infinitely more trying than hard work.

He was feeling, too, the mortification that lay before him in the near future, when he must return home and face Mr. Josiah Dawe's disappointed countenance, and admit that he had failed in his endeavour. The canvas bag was not empty yet, for he had gone to work with much prudence and skill; but then, the search had not been successful either, and therein lay the sting of it all.

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The information he had gleaned concerning the missing woman was briefly this: Mrs. Hemmingway, who was of some kin to the two Desarts, Leon and Philip, had kept a small shop for the buying and selling of ladies' left-off clothing, in Lower Camden Street. Something besides this clothing she had traded in, according to popular rumour, and had got herself into trouble with the police in consequence, rendering it necessary for her to dispose of the business with all haste, and absent herself from behind the counter for a time. The trouble, whatever it was, had apparently blown over to a certain extent only, for though Mrs. Hemmingway had often paid visits to Greenwich since that time, she always took care that they should be entirely unexpected, and as brief as it was possible to make them. It was in the hope of one of these visits that Hubert Palmer had lingered so long in his unsavoury lodging; but only that evening, whilst he had been, according to his wont, lounging in the vicinity of Mrs. Hemmingway's former shop, a rumour had reached him that the good lady was likely to extend her absence for an indefinite length of time, owing to the fact that she had embroiled herself in a fresh direction, the immediate result of which was detention, with, possibly, punishment to follow.

More than this Hubert had been unable to gather, though he had tried hard to discover the name of the place where she was being held in durance. But no one seemed to know; the rumour had arisen as rumours will, and it was utterly impossible to trace it to its source.

Failing any more tidings of Mrs. Hemmingway, Hubert had tried cautiously—very cautiously now—for some information concerning the Desarts, but no one seemed to know whom he was referring to, and he could only come to the conclusion that if the cousins had been known in that neighbourhood, it must have been by a different name entirely.

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So he was going back to Clorpe early the next morning, to tell Mr. Josiah Dawe that the quest had been futile; that Mrs. Hemmingway, although in life still, was, by reason of circumstances, as impossible to reach almost as if she had already passed the bourne whence no traveller ever returns; and, worse than all, he would have to meet his betrothed, and tell her the truth concerning his failure —after which there would be nothing left for either of them but to wait indefinitely.

At this point his musings were interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of his landlady, a frowsy slattern, who exactly matched her surroundings.

"My supper, Mrs. Smith? Yes, I should be glad of something, a cup of tea, and — and let's see; oh, I think I'll have a rasher with it!" he said, feeling very much as if a whole side of bacon would not come amiss to him then.

"I'll bring it for you in a minute, but see here, Mr. Palmer, I want a word of advice on a small matter, if so be as you can spare me a minute," and she dumped a dingy bundle on the dirty table, and commenced untying the knots which secured it.

"What is it?" he asked, rousing at once to take an active interest in the matter, in order to get it settled the sooner, and so make way for the supper he was so sorely needing.

"I'd a lodger in my three-pair back some time larst year, and she left this behind in part payment of what she owed; she'd been expecting some money to fall in, which it didn't come, and was forced at larst to go off in my debt, though she promised faithful to come back and pay, if only I'd keep them for six months before selling," and Mrs. Smith stooped to bring her teeth to bear upon a knot that was proving obdurate. She was not a cockney by birth or training, having been reared in the country, and had, therefore, only an inflection of cockneyism in speech and manner, though for slovenly untidiness in house and person she would have been hard to beat anywhere.

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"And is the time up?" asked Hubert, drawing the invalided chair on which he was sitting a trifle nearer to the table—an unguarded movement, by the way, which nearly led to his downfall, the chair not being equal to the strain of the sideway movement, and threatening to collapse altogether.

"Yes, it was up two months ago, but I would have waited a while longer yet, if it hadn't been that Mrs. Walker at the pie-shop has just been telling me as Mrs. Hemmingway has been took for something or other, and may be in quod for some considerable time."

"Mrs. Hemmingway?" Hubert gave a great start, which finished the mischief the sideway movement had begun, and he and the chair came to the floor with a crash.

Mrs. Smith flung up her hands in dismay. "Was there ever such carelessness? Mr. Palmer, I shall expect to be paid for that chair; why, it's in ruins complete."

"And I shall expect to be paid for my bruises, at this rate. If you let furnished rooms, you should undertake to find chairs strong enough for your lodgers to sit upon; why, I might have broken my arm, or even my neck, coming down in that fashion; and then where would you have been?" he asked, testily.

But she being a practical person of a very literal turn of mind, replied cheerfully enough, "Oh, it wasn't likely you'd have come by your death, sir, and I'd have been all right if you had, as I should have kept your clothes to pay what's owing for lodgings, and the parish would have seen to your being put underground. But here's the things; will they be worth much, do you expect?"

He turned them over with trembling fingers. An old brooch or two, a roll of black ribbon nearly new, and of good quality; a Bible, worn and shabby, but not, alas! with perusal; a pair of scissors, and an old Russia-leather housewife, such as was common in the days when our grandmothers were young, all of these being wrapped in

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articles of wearing apparel, of a worn and dilapidated appearance.

The housewife had a silver clasp, and when Hubert Palmer had fumbled it unfastened, out fell a bundle of letters contained within the folds of the case. Some of them were old and yellow, some of more recent date, but one, still contained in the envelope in which it had been posted, arrested the young man's attention, and he picked it up with eager fingers, Mrs. Smith looking on the while, and marvelling that he should trouble himself about a parcel of rubbishing letters when the case that held them had silver fittings.

Out from its envelope came the letter with a jerk, and there at the bottom of the second page was the name of the writer, Alice Desart. It was the second letter which she had written to Mrs. Hemmingway from that out-of-the-way place in Wales where she had stayed with Mrs. Wynter, and in answer to the one received containing the confirmation of Leon's death.

Hubert drew a long breath. His quest had been futile certainly, so far as the object of his coming was concerned.

But if he could confront Mark Lester with that letter, the master of the Priors would at least be able to see that Alice had believed her first husband to be dead before consenting to marry a second.

It might not lead to much, might not shorten by a week the tedious waiting that separated him from Ethel. But if it served to set Mrs. Lester—and to him she had never ceased to be Mrs. Lester—above suspicion in the eyes of those who had doubted her, it would have been well worth the dreary weeks of hunting through unsavoury places, and of associating in questionable company.

"What is there in the letter—anything about money?" demanded Mrs. Smith, suspiciously, her lodger's abstraction being incomprehensible to her. She had never read the letters, had scarcely opened the bundle even, for she

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was a busy woman, with little time to spare for prying into things not calling for immediate attention at her hands.

"No, there is nothing about money in the letter, but I will pay you ten shillings if you will let me have it to take away with me," he said, in a tone the eagerness of which he could not wholly repress, despite his endeavours so to do.

"Ten shillings? Ah, but perhaps it is worth more than that to somebody else," and she craned her neck to see what was written on the sheet of paper.

He put it into her hand immediately, saying, "Read it for yourself, and see if you think you would get more for it in any other direction;" and, whilst she perused it, turned his attention to the other letters and papers that had been contained in the case.

"What makes it worth so much to you?" she asked, suspicious still, as, having read the letter, she held it towards him again.

"I—oh—I—well, it's from a friend of mine," he stammered, growing red in the face, and terribly confused.

She drew in her hand again, still retaining the letter. "No, I don't think I'll let you have it for ten shillings; happen some one will give me twenty for it if I wait a little longer."

A cold perspiration broke out on Hubert's brow; had he got so far, to get no further? And he could have groaned aloud as he watched the obstinate lines deepen and set round the mouth of Mrs. Smith. Then an impulse came to him to tell her all, and yielding to it, he plunged into the story, speaking rapidly, breathlessly almost, whilst Mrs. Smith's mouth came open with sheer amazement.

"And he took the word of a man like that against hers?" she interjected in a bewildered tone, upon hearing of the summary judgment dealt out to Alice by Mark Lester.

Hubert Palmer nodded, too much carried away by his own sympathy for the victim to be capable of any other reply.

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"What a soft idiot the man must be!" exclaimed the good woman, with uplifted hands, "not to be able to see that the evil in the man's heart would lead him naturally to speak ill of the woman he desired to wrong."

"And the letter—can I have it?" he asked, feeling that it must be now or never.

"Take it, and welcome. No, I don't want any money for it, seeing why you want to carry it away, and I only hope it will serve to show that man what a great, green stupid he has been. Lor', but I'd have taught him a lesson if he'd been married to me, and chucked me over for a thing like that!"

Mrs. Smith's words, shorn of the adjectives, which do not look pretty in print, were as nothing compared with the disdainful contempt of her manner, as she viciously snapped her fingers at an imaginary Mark Lester, and stamped upon the dirty floor in her impotent indignation.

At that moment there came a loud, imperative summons from below, and she ran down to answer it, flying back a moment later with a telegram in her hand.

"Oh, sir, I hope it's no bad news?" she panted, out of breath with her rapid run upstairs.

He tore the brown envelope open with nervous fingers, thinking of his mother and of Ethel, but the message referred to neither of these, and was from Mr. Josiah Dawe, merely bidding him return at once.

And though he noticed it not, the telegram bore the same date as that of the board-day at Rushton workhouse.

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CHAPTER XXII.

BEFORE THE BOARD.

MARK Lester's shout of surprise attracted but a momentary attention, however, for at that moment the chairman rapped smartly on the table, calling out, in dictatorial tones, "We will have the woman, Sarah Hemmingway, brought in, and hear what she has to say for herself regarding this most unprovoked assault upon a feeble and defenceless man."

A bustle among the relieving officers gathered about the door, as they shouted the order down the stairs to the porter in the hall below, who in his turn sent the shout along a passage to where the troublesome casual was being held in temporary durance.

Then, cutting through the babble of discussion which had broken out with renewed energy and force, came the shrill, strident voice of Mr. Symes, constant still to his original grievance. "If only you had listened to me, gentlemen, and raised that wall a foot higher, this deplorable misadventure could never have arisen."

A perfect yell of denial broke from the others at this, and in the noise and confusion following upon it, that Mark Lester's sudden agitation should be forgotten was not wonderful.

He had sunk back in his chair with the sensation of a man giddy from a shock of earthquake, his limbs trembling, his heart palpitating, and a horrible feeling of nausea upon him. He heard the chairman's order for Sarah Hemmingway to be brought in, heard it as in a dream, whilst the room, the windows, and his excited fellow-guardians

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gyrated round and round him with waltz-like swiftness. Bah! He must pull himself together, or in another moment he would be fainting like a woman, and for what? Simply because a man's name had been mentioned in his hearing—a man long since dead, and buried in a grave that was not his own.

A moment of hard struggle for self-control, and he began to master his emotion. The objects around him consented to stand still, and the choking palpitation slowly subsided. He was himself again, and sat erect in his chair once more, wondering a little at the sudden hush that had dropped upon the commotion which raged but a moment previously.

A woman was advancing up the room, marshalled by the assistant matron and an able-bodied female pauper, constituted into a wardress for the nonce, greatly to her own satisfaction, if one might judge from the complacent smirk upon her face.

The woman thus held in custody was very tall, and had, doubtless, also been very strong and powerful in her time; but old age was upon her now, and the vengeance she had dealt out so unsparingly to the unfortunate man who had excited her anger, must have been done in the heat and violence of a fit of passion.

The chairman surveyed her sternly. The gentlemen sitting round the table cast disapproving glances at her worn, defiant face, and the able-bodied female pauper took a firmer grip at the arm she was holding, shaking it roughly as she did so, to emphasize the fact of bondage.

But in that movement she allowed her zeal to outrun her discretion, and was promptly pulled up by the chairman, who—however much he might see fit to harry troublesome people himself in his official capacity—never delegated this privilege to other people.

"Unhand the woman, and fall back!" he said, sharply. "What do you mean by gripping her in that fashion, and shaking her, too, as a terrier shakes a rat? Why, it is

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perfectly monstrous! You could not have done more had she been imprisoned on a capital charge."

"It may be a capital charge yet, if the man dies, and it is well to be cautious," put in Mr. Symes, quickly. "If that wall had been raised——"

But the chairman cut him short. He had heard enough concerning that wall to last him for some time, and, besides, he was privately beginning to think that it really would have been wiser to have effected the improvement when it was first suggested, only it might have flattered the vanity of Mr. Symes to admit so much, and hence he refrained. "What is your name?" he demanded, sternly, looking at the woman, who gazed about her with an air of perfect ease and self-possession, from which not even her ragged and mean attire could detract.

"I am Sarah Hemmingway, widow, formerly of Greenwich, but just now of no fixed abode, as I am travelling in search of health," she retorted, in a mocking tone, staring hard at the gentleman occupying the chair, as if with the intention of putting him out of countenance.

"What is your occupation?" was the next question, put in a freezing tone; but Mrs. Hemmingway was in no sense chilled by it, as she replied easily:

"Oh, I have no fixed occupation. Indeed, of choice, I should not work at all."

"That is the case with most of us, I suppose," murmured the vice-chairman, who was a tall, lean man, with a terribly harassed expression of face, which was, doubtless, owing to his having such hard work to keep Mr. Symes in order on those occasions when he himself occupied the chair.

"How old are you?" was the next question, and the chairman's voice did not get pleasanter. He deemed the woman playing with the board, a course of procedure not to be tolerated in any one, much less a recalcitrant casual.

Mrs. Hemmingway flung up her head with a haughty

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gesture. "That, sir, is a question no gentleman should ask a lady—not if he desires a truthful answer, that is; but in order to show myself superior to my sex—whether peeresses or paupers—I will tell you my age: I am seventy-one!"

A murmur of surprise ran round the room, for though it was plain she was no longer young, no one of all those present would have deemed her past seventy. All eyes were fixed on her now, saving those of Mark Lester. His were bent on the table before him, although it is safe to aver that his ears took every possible advantage that his eyes so persistently ignored.

"Will you tell us why you made such a murderous attack upon the man now lying at the point of death in the infirmary?" the chairman asked; and now his tone was more suave, and his manner gentler than it had been before.

"Is he as bad as that?" she enquired, in a tone of indifference.

"We fear so," he said, with a deeper gravity.

"Ah, his heart, I suppose. The other went like that, only he went quicker."

"Why did you hunt him down, and why, when you chanced to see him over the wall——"

"If *my* advice had been taken, that chance would never have occurred," burst out Mr. Symes, in an irrepressible manner, as if to keep quiet any longer was manifestly impossible.

"Silence!" thundered the chairman, glaring upon the truculent little man, as if intent upon annihilating him out of hand.

Mrs. Hemmingway's lips parted in a smile of contemptuous amusement over the interruption, and Mr. Symes gazed at the ceiling for a time in silence.

"The board is waiting for your explanation," the chairman said, turning to the woman, whose face had set into grim, stern lines once more.

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"And the board shall have it," she replied, quickly, wheeling round upon her heel, and surveying the faces of the guardians, which, with the exception of Mr. Symes and Mark Lester, were intently fixed upon her. "I meant to punish Philip Desart, if only I could get hold of him, for his base cheating of me."

"He had wronged you, then?" asked the chairman, with an inflection of sympathy in his tone.

"When did he ever do anything else?" queried Mrs. Hemmingway, savagely. "I took those two boys, gentlemen, almost as infants. Poor, desolate orphans they were, and I thought to save them the degradation of being reared in the workhouse; but, ah, me! they have been in worse places since then than any workhouse within the four seas of Britain."

"You speak of two boys—who was the other?" asked the chairman, who always liked to be well informed upon any subject treated in his presence.

"The other was cousin to the man I chastized. His name was Leon Desart, and he came by his death some years ago in this very neighbourhood, at a place called Stillwater."

The chairman nodded; he understood now. The others understood, also—in part—and they turned their gaze from Mrs. Hemmingway to Mark Lester, whose head was bowed lower still, whilst within his breast the pangs of an accusing conscience were rending away the last remaining shreds of his self-respect.

"Some time after Leon died, his wife—widow she was then—wrote for confirmation of the fact. She had seen him, it appeared, after his death, and even identified him, yet could not be certain about the identity. I showed the letter to Philip—the man lying yonder"—and she nodded in the direction of the infirmary—"and I asked him what I should say."

"And he told you?" asked the chairman, leaning towards

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her in the eagerness of his interest, whilst the other guardians were torn in two between the desire to gaze at Mr. Lester, and see how he took the disclosures, and their eagerness to watch the face of the woman who was telling the story.

"He told me that there was money in it, if only we played our cards properly, made no false moves, and refrained from hurrying the situation. I was quite willing to be guided by him, for he is a master-hand at manœuvring, so I answered the letter according to his dictation, telling Mrs. Desart that she had been quite right in her identification of Leon, and that Philip was also dead, having expired in my house only a short time previously. I dwelt considerably on the circumstances of his illness and death, in order to lay the greater stress on the fact of his decease."

"And you have the hardihood to stand there, and own to conduct so sinful?" demanded the chairman, in a shocked tone. He was a good, christian man, and the mere contemplation of such villainy made him shiver.

"You asked for the truth. If you prefer to hear no more, I can be silent," retorted Mrs. Hemmingway.

"No, no; go on, we want to hear," broke in chorus from the gentlemen clustered about the table, while even Mark Lester lifted his ghastly white face to petition her to proceed.

She bowed with a derisive air, as if contemptuously amused at the interest she had excited, and then continued her story. "After that letter, and in answer to it, came another from Mrs. Desart, sending me money, and condoling with me in my trouble at the death of Philip; this I showed to the supposed dead man, and he laughed over it, saying that it was all right, and we had only to wait, at the same time bidding me take in no more letters from that quarter, but to write 'Gone away' upon them, and send them to the dead-letter office. Later on, from a sure quarter, we heard of the marriage of Leon's widow to a

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gentleman whose name I cannot remember, but who was wealthy, and in a good position. About this time Philip ceased to live with me, saying that it was better for our purpose that he should not be seen anywhere in my vicinity. But on one occasion when I chanced to meet him unexpectedly in the city, I cried out in affright, thinking it was the dead cousin, Leon, that I beheld, for, by some means or another, he had a livid, ghastly scar on the left side of his face, just such a mark as had disfigured the face of Leon, and which, indeed, was our usual means of knowing the cousins apart, so much alike were they."

"Why did he do that?" asked the chairman.

"Wait, and you shall see," she replied, in an imperative tone.

"Go on, go on!" murmured the others; but Mark Lester's face was hidden in his hands.

Mrs. Hemmingway bowed again, with an air of triumph this time, as a successful actress might after being recalled at the close of some brilliant performance. "The next thing I heard was that Philip was in prison for theft, and I grew angry with him for having been so incautious at such a critical time. However, there was nothing for it but to wait, and this I did with what patience I might until he came out again, though I suffered much from extreme poverty, having sometimes no money for days with which to buy necessary food. Then Philip's time was up, and he came to see me directly he was released, telling me that our opportunity was close at hand, and that he had already frightened Alice's new husband into a fit."

"Who is Alice?" was the very unnecessary question of the chairman, whereat the others groaned; but then he was a magistrate also, and took nothing for granted, however obvious it might be.

"Alice Desart, Leon's widow," said Mrs. Hemmingway, sharply, decidedly objecting to these interruptions to her recital. "A very good match for Leon we had thought

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her, too, only between them they bungled the business, and lost the money that should have come to her."

"Go on," murmured the vice-chairman, "that is not the story."

"Philip never came near me after that, and as the weeks went by I got anxious to know when we might expect some blackmail from the second husband, when lo! I was told that the wretched, incompetent man had so blundered that the gentleman, instead of being willing to pay the supposed first husband to keep out of the way, had actually turned Alice adrift, thinking her as bad as the rest of us, and in consequence not willing to pay a penny-piece to have the matter hushed up. I was wrathful then, gentlemen, and determined to be revenged on the man who could turn out poor work like that, and I have tramped the country ever since in order to find him, and pay him out—and I have done it," she added, in a deep tone.

Mark Lester sprang up in his place, his face ghastly, his eyes wildly glaring. "And you, a woman, to aid and abet a foul plot like that, whereby a sister woman's peace is ruined, her reputation destroyed, her happiness spoiled, and the life of her child endangered!"

Mrs. Hemmingway, bold as she was, shrank a little nearer to the chairman for protection, for Mark's aspect was to the last degree ferocious.

"Who—who are you?" she faltered, as if instinctively guessing that this man had reason for his wrath.

"I am the individual that you plotted to blackmail," he stormed, and when the sound of his voice died away you might have heard a pin drop, so great was the hush that had fallen upon the room.

But Mrs. Hemmingway was quick to recover the momentary shock of this announcement, and faced round upon him with a sneering smile. "If I had been in your place, do you think I'd have turned my wife adrift on the testimony of a craven cur like the mean scoundrel yonder,

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to whom I dealt out his deserts? No, indeed, I'd have stuck to her like grim death; but men are all more or less stupid, and you seem to be particularly so. We always knew that Leon was not fit to wipe her boots, and you can't be a much better sort. Poor Alice, there can be no doubt but that she has been unfortunate in her choice of partners!"

Scathing words these, and uttered in a loud, rasping tone of extreme spite and dislike. For one brief moment it seemed almost as if Mark would spring right over the table, and fling himself on the woman, but the hand of his neighbour, the clergyman, was on his arm, and a voice in his ear said:

"No, no, we will deal with her; go you and make your peace with Mrs. Lester, man—go at once!"

No need to urge him. Straight out of the room strode Mark, through a silence that might be felt, past the workhouse master and the group of relieving officers gathered about the door, down the stairs, and out through the big square hall below. Some one thrust a hat into his hand, some one else led up his horse, and springing into the saddle, with a muttered, incoherent word of thanks, he rode away, steering a straight course over field and fallow for Bockley Bent.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

The Humbling Complete.

ALICE had learned to carry her trouble where alone help could be found, and in the learning had gained peace of heart. It was not that the sorrow of her exile was lessened, or that she had ceased to grieve over the disaster of her life, but that the suffering had become more bearable since she did not bear it alone.

The drooping of Lillith had been carefully hidden from her as yet. No need to torture the denied mother-love, time enough to tell her by-and-bye, so said Mr. Josiah Dawe, and in his decision Miss Keziah tearfully acquiesced; formerly it had been a rare thing for her to weep, but since this trouble at the Priors her eyes had been often wet, aye, and her pillow, too.

Alice had nothing to complain of in regard to the kindness of her husband's kin; indeed, could the brother and sister have had their will, she would have been fed on the fat of the land, and have spent the days in luxurious idleness. This, however, Alice refused to do, insisting on sharing in all the work of the house, making bread, beating butter, pickling pork, and all the manifold toil of a farm-house of the old-fashioned sort.

She was upstairs in the apple-room on that day of the Rushton board meeting, sorting the few remaining apples, wiping and turning them with all the care that apples call for so late in the season; wiping her eyes, too, with a handkerchief already wet with tears, for the trouble was more than usually present with her this morning, the result, perhaps, of an almost sleepless night, and she had been thankful to make the apples an excuse to creep away by herself, and there do battle with her pain.

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Slowly as she worked, and frequent as were the pauses she made, the last of the apples had almost been reached when the quick thud of a horse's hoofs approaching the house caused her to rise to her feet, and go to the window. A thought flashed into her mind that the rider might be Raymond, come to bring her news of Lillith, for although the knowledge of the child's ailing had been kept from her, maternal instinct was keenly alive to the fact that the little one in her late mental awakening would yearn most for mother.

But the window did not help her much; the horseman, whoever he was, had disappeared from view, and with a sigh she turned back to the apples again.

A commotion below, doors opened with a clatter, and shut with a bang, Miss Keziah's voice in a thin shriek of surprise, followed by a heavy tread on the stairs, feet that stumbled with haste, so it seemed to her as she turned with a white face to the door, catching at a chair to steady herself.

She knew whose step it was, but was ignorant, poor soul, of the errand that brought her husband to Bockley Bent that day, and deemed that he came but in anger, or with some new grievance, fancied or real, with which to upbraid her.

A choking sob escaped her as the footsteps reached the top of the stairs. Why could he not leave her in peace, such peace as yet remained to her? And she cowered in actual fear on the chair into which she had sunk as he appeared on the threshold, completely blocking the narrow, old-fashioned doorway of the apple-room.

There was no anger in her heart, despite her provocation, only fierce, intolerable pain, as she hid her face in her hands, feeling that another bitter word from him would kill her.

"Alice, Alice, I have come to ask your forgiveness, to pray for it on my knees, if you will!" he panted, coming a step forward into the room, where the odour of apples hung so heavily.

But she put out her hands as if to stay his approach,

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and he, in his late-coming humility, mistook the action for repugnance, and that righteous resentment a deeply-wronged woman might be expected to display.

He stopped short then, and the bitterness of his self-reproach thrilled in his voice when he spoke. "I deserve it all, Alice, and if you refuse to hear me, I dare not complain, since I treated you as bad—nay, worse. I cannot hope that you will overlook the past, but I have come to offer you the best, the only restitution, that I can. Go back to the Priors, to your child, and to my children, who called you mother even when I refused to call you wife. Go back to your rightful place, and be as happy as you can. I will not disturb your peace, or insult you by my presence."

"Mark, Mark, what do you mean?" she gasped, finding voice at last, and thoroughly frightened by the wildness of his manner.

"I mean that it is I who have sinned, not you. Sinned in ever doubting your truth, and sinned again in casting you out of my home. But try as I would, I could not cast you out of my heart, and the strength of my love has been not the least part of my torment, Alice, my wife!" he said, his tone husky and broken, as he stood before her, swaying to and fro, like a man who is drunken.

"But you forget—I am not your wife!" she cried, in a sharp tone.

"You are my wife, both legally and in the sight of God. It was Leon who died at Stillwater, and the scoundrel Philip who came between——"

But Alice had risen, and was standing before him, the dawn of a half-incredulous happiness in her eyes, and a wild flutter of re-awakening hope in her heart.

"Then I am not Alice Desart, and Lillith is——. Oh! Mark, let us thank God for His goodness to us!" and she fell sobbing into his arms.

There is no measuring the magnanimity of some women,

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and Alice displayed the most magnificently forgiving spirit that could have been conceived. When her husband would have knelt to ask her pardon, she just put her arms around his neck, and kissed him through her tears, anxious to spare him the pangs that she had suffered, and little guessing how thereby the exceeding bitterness of his self-reproach was increased.

And so the reconciliation was effected in the old apple-room under the eaves, whilst the starlings wheeled and fluttered about the roof over their heads, scolding and making love in a breath, and giving never a thought, or a look in at the window, to the man and woman there, whose tears had mingled in a common flow.

Miss Keziah came panting up the stairs at length, anxious to know what it all meant. She had been beating the butter in the outer kitchen when Mark rode up to the house, and burst in at the door, demanding to be told where Alice was.

In her surprise, she had been only able to ejaculate, "In the apple-room upstairs," and then he had disappeared in search of his wife, and Miss Keziah was left to wonder.

Even now she seemed hardly able to understand Mark's incoherent explanation, and seeing her bewilderment, Alice came to her rescue.

"It *was* Leon who died at Stillwater, Keziah, and so I have been Mark's wife all the time, and now he will take me home again. Will you take me to-day, Mark? I want to go so very badly," she asked, turning to look into his face again.

For answer, he caught her in his arms, telling her she should go at once, that very minute, if she chose.

And she did choose, going downstairs clinging to her husband's arm, her face wearing an April aspect of smiles and tears; the smiles for the present, the tears for the past.

Mr. Josiah Dawe was standing in the passage below; he had seen Mark's arrival from afar, and had hurried to the

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house, thinking only of Lillith, fearing lest the child might be worse, dying even; and blaming himself that he had refused to allow her mother to be warned.

But when he saw the radiant face of Alice, his fears fled like snow before the sun; and, throwing his battered old hat into the air, with a hurrah that made the rafters ring, he prepared himself to listen to the explanation his step-brother had to offer.

"But you were over hasty with her, Mark; let it be a warning to you not to believe in appearances again. And now let us thank the Giver of all good for bringing you together again."

No great power for public prayer distinguished the old farmer of Bockley Bent; yet was his thanksgiving eloquent that day, as he prayed for the husband and wife, kneeling side by side at the foot of the stairs.

He lent them his fat pony and the little old chaise, in which to return to the Priors, for Mark's horse was spent with the gallop from Rushton workhouse; and besides, it would not have been fitting for Mrs. Lester to be taken back to her home, seated pillion-wise behind her husband.

And when they had started, Mr. Josiah Dawe went down to the village, and sent that telegram of recall to Hubert Palmer.

* * * * *

Philip Desart died in the infirmary ward that night; and almost at the same moment in which the breath left his body, Mrs. Hemmingway was smitten down with a stroke of paralysis, which, though rendering her helpless, did not deprive her of sight, speech, or reason.

Grateful to her for the part she had played in setting right the villainy of Philip, Mark Lester did not leave her to languish amid the paupers of Rushton, but had her removed to the cottage of Mrs. Lot Godfrey, whom he paid liberally to minister to the stricken woman.

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Hubert Palmer had no long time of waiting for his wife after that. And Lillith speedily recovered from her temporary fading, when once her mother's arms were about her again.

But Mark Lester's humbling had received its completing touches in the frank forgiveness meted out to him by his reinstated wife; and, standing by the tomb of Leon Desart, he took its lesson to his own heart: "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall!"

THE END.

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